

DEATHREALM

THE GATE WHERE HORROR BEGINS



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Deathrealm

THE GATE WHERE HORROR BEGINS

Issue Number 4

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This issue dedicated to Wilted Greens, wherever he is.

Ripper

By Steven K. Mitchell

Stealthily sliding

Slimlike

Toward pulsing hearts

Silent, steel blade

In quivering hand . . .

R.I.P.
From Ye Editor

Yo. DEATHREALM and I are here yet again, with a fine collection of tales for you to chew on. I'm highly satisfied with the quality of the fiction in this issue, and I hope you'll be as impressed as I with the authors whose works are being presented. As DEATHREALM has attracted a loyal and growing readership, so it has attracted the attention of a large number of fine authors, many whose work you'll find herein. Of course, I'd love to be able to publish a greater number of the submissions I receive through a more frequent publishing schedule, but as the term "small press" implies, DEATHREALM is still a publication of somewhat limited resources. I hope you will approve of the choices I have selected from the wealth of material I have received. I wish to offer my thanks to the authors who have contributed to this magazine, both successfully and unsuccessfully. Thanks also to the readers who have supported this project of mine over the past year. I hoped from the outset that DEATHREALM would find a readership sufficient to allow its continued existence. I'm looking forward to another successful year in 1988.

Yes, DEATHREALM has moved to a new home. The current address is 3223-F Regents Park Lane, Greensboro, NC 27405. Hopefully, there will be no delay in production from the turmoil of moving.

With this issue, please welcome my wife Peggy as DEATHREALM's Associate Editor. Finally, she has come to understand there is more to horror than living at my house and has agreed to offer her assistance in this publishing venture. Anyone desiring to submit complaints, death threats or other such ill will, please direct them her way rather than mine.

You'll notice that I've gone to column format (not here — turn the page) due to popular request from people whose eyes have exercised themselves into a chronic tennis-ball syndrome. I imagine this will be a standard from here on. Next issue — an anniversary issue of sorts — will include fiction by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Jeff Johnston, C. S. Fuqua, Dan Van Mourik, and Wayne Allen Sallee; plus poetry by Dwight E. Humphries, John Grey, Shawn Ramsey, Geri Eileen Davis, and Karl Miller. I think it's shaping up to be the best yet.

Ed Shannon begins his novel review column in this issue, which will be a regular or semi-regular feature in the future (fine flow, eh?). Recommended reading is THE MINNESOTA FANTASY REVIEW, published by the nefarious Ed with Mike Odden as Art Director. Both Ed and Mike are serious devotees of the genre with lots of enthusiasm and lots of talent.

There's no need to tell you what lurks in the pages ahead. I don't like an "editorial" that might as well be a contents page, listing who and what appears in the issue without any further elaboration — you're going to find out for yourself. I must, however, insist that you proceed with caution. I've had reports that issue #3 severely harmed a number of people, and #4 is likely to be far more dangerous. If last issue put people in the hospital, then this time, the taxidermy man gonna have a heart attack when he sees what I bring him!¹

Hope the holiday season proves miserable for all of you. Please enjoy DEATHREALM #4, but don't go out for munchies afterwards. There's laws against it.

Mark Rainey
Editor-in-Chief

Mark Rainey

THE LOWLAND BEGGAR

By Colleen Drippé

The wooded scarps of the western mountains had long since given way to undulating hills dotted here and there with cattle and the muted gold of distant thatch. Treve had lost count of the signs of human habitation he had seen, though none of the steadings lay along his road. Behind him lay the bleak winter and the uncertain mountain spring — ahead, the lowland summer, and beyond that, the sea.

He let Fog have his head and the horse moved eagerly toward the rich meadows of the coastlands. The fitted breeze, laden with the scents of herb and flower, blew Treve's hair about his face and when he bent over the horse's head, those ruddy strands mingled with Fog's smoke-colored mane as though embers smoldered ash. He reached one six-fingered hand to shove the hair from his eyes and froze, hand upraised, as with his other hand, he drew on the reins.

From ahead came the sounds of boots and the clack of wood meeting steel. Someone grunted hoarsely and Fog danced backward as Treve loosened his own weapon. Treve had had a bellfury and more of killing — back there in the hills — and his grey eyes narrowed with distaste at the thought of more. But this was the only road to the sea and he would carve passage for himself if he must.

That proved unnecessary, for no sooner had Treve come in sight of what must have been a robbery, when the assailant fled, leaving behind an old man who stood in the middle of the road holding a staff in both hands.

Treve reined in and the two regarded one another silently while the crackling of brush to their right diminished and was gone.

Slowly the old man lowered his staff. He was thin to the point of emaciation, grey-haired and bearded. Gazing into the disturbing hollows of those burning eyes, Treve wondered that such a one had had the strength to wield any weapon at all.

"My thanks," the old man said with a thin smile, "for your proximity."
"You fought well enough, it would seem."

"Ah, but now you assure my safety." The smile lengthened and yet the old man kept his lips together, denying Treve the sight of his probably toothless gums.

"Are you hurt, old man? Have you been robbed?"

"I've nothing to rob," the other said. "Though you villain would have had my life no doubt, to pay himself for his trouble."

"Are you a beggar, then?" Treve asked, taking in the man's tattered garments and manifest lack of possessions. He noted also, with a faint thrill of revulsion, that the beggar, if such he was, had let his fingernails grow until they were claws, jagged on the ends, greyed and yellowed with filth.

The old man nodded, leaning on his staff as though his strength were gone. "I am called Lo-ar," he said, peering up at Treve. "And yes, I am a beggar. I entrust myself to your charity."

Treve hid a grimace of mingled amusement and irritation. "My charity, Grandfather," he said aloud, "is more of will than of substance. But such as it is, you are welcome to it." He had said what his innate courtesy and the half-forgotten remnants of courtly breeding required, but he saw plainly that Lo-ar meant to take him at his word.

"It will accompany you then, to the next settlement," the old man said with a meaningful glance to either side of the road.

Treve nodded. While there were few enough trees here beyond the mountains, the brush grew thickly. One feather-leaved species in particular arched flower-laden branches above the general mass of foliage, drawing hordes of humming bees to its clustered whiteness. There were indeed many places to hide.

"You had better ride, then," Treve said and dismounted. At first, Fog shied away from the beggar — hardly surprising, Treve thought, as he drew near enough to smell him. But when the old man had twined his bony fingers into the horse's mane, Fog grew still and only his rolling eyes told Treve plainly that he was displeased.

Treve rubbed his own hands surreptitiously on his breeches after helping Lo-ar into the saddle, and when he had to breathe, he turned his face away. "How many were there?" he asked now. "Your attackers?"
"One," Lo-ar said and Treve saw that the old man was watching him intently.

"Alone?"

"I believe so."

"That is strange." They spoke no more

¹A memorable line originally spake by Cap'n Quint.

then as the road narrowed and entered a gorge. A few trees did grow here, but they were great heavy things, dark-leaved and twisted. Treve could hear the distant gurgle of running water. After a time, the road slanted upward and emerged onto a broad, fairly level country, bathed in the afternoon sun.

Treve stared out over that gilded plain and wondered if, even now, that same sun burnished the eastern sea above lost Panesh. And then he turned his thoughts aside from that. His homeland was gone — cursed by the gods and taken by the waves. Sorcerers, his people had been called, and dreamers of uncanny dreams. For were they not marked as no other folk were, that all might know them for what they were?

Leading the horse, Treve clutched his hand upon the reins and wondered if the old man had seen the oddity of that hand. Perhaps it did not matter here on the other side of the peninsula. This would be a different sea and these a different people. And yet, it seemed even worse that Panesh the fair should be forgotten.

He ground his teeth and strode faster, guiding the horse off the road and up a gradual slope to a level spot among stunted pines. "You must be weary, Lo-ar," he said.

"And you, I think," the beggar remarked. "For you have walked." The old man seemed fully recovered from his battle, and indeed, as the sun disappeared beyond the gentle swell of the western plain, he appeared to grow stronger and more youthful. But that, of course, was impossible.

Lo-ar would not eat when Treve offered to share his bread and the broiled carcass of a wood-duck he had saved from his breakfast. The beggar lay down, wrapping himself in his malodorous cloak, and fell asleep before Treve had finished eating. Treve was not yet ready for sleep. He brought out a clay pipe and a small pouch of mountain herbs and sat smoking and dreaming as the fire burned low and the moon began to rise. At last he lay down and dozed, throwing off his own cloak in the unaccustomed warmth of the night.

Later in the night, Fog nickered and stamped among the weeds and Treve knew that he *must* rise. He had forgotten to remove Fog's saddle — but no, that could not be right, for he remembered taking it off and rubbing down the horse's gleaming

sides with grass. Maybe it was water Fog required — but hadn't he led his mount to a stream earlier in the evening? There, beside that leaning bay tree . . .

To his dull surprise, Treve found that he stood upon a low hill and that his campsite had become a distant glow of dying coals. The night sky arched above him, pulsing with stars that for some reason filled him with terror. He wanted to cower there on the hillside beneath the weight of those stars, but he forced himself to stand erect, though his teeth chattered with more than cold. Something was hunting him — he was sure of it — and for a moment, he didn't dare turn. When he did, he saw in the constellation of the wolf, a pair of greenish lights that were not stars. They seemed to watch him with relentless patience as slowly, but steadily, they drew nearer.

Treve fought free of his paralysis and as the great gladed pads thudded to earth, he reached vainly for his sword. He had left it behind! The next moment he was grasped by huge rending jaws which tore savagely into one shoulder. Cursing so that he would not scream, he hooked the fingers of his free hand about that huge muzzle, straining with the beast until his blood pooled blackly around his feet. He slipped in that dark liquid and was dragged down to one knee.

The fangs sank deeper and now it was all Treve could do to hold off the red-tinted blackness that grew before his eyes. He knew well that if he once fell into that waiting pit he would surely die. The wolf had begun to drag him, scraping over the rock to its lair and, though he still struggled, he could gain no purchase on the ground. He had one last sight of an oddly delft hillside, limned against the stars, and he saw with the vividness of approaching death, that its sides were dotted with pale ruins — squared whitenesses which gleamed like scattered teeth.

And then abruptly the pain was gone and he awoke — or seemed to wake. Treve lay on the ground near the ashes of the campfire and across the clearing, wavering in the light of the setting moon, a dim, whitish figure beckoned him silently. Treve could see no face, but he had an impression of inhuman beauty, of glittering goodwill tarnished ever so slightly by the dread that was on him. The apparition spoke, or strove to speak, but there were no words.

Treve woke fully then and drew his cloak around him, shivering in the predawn chill as he rose to throw a handful of sticks onto the coals. Across from him, Lo-ar slept, sprawled on his back. The beggar's face was obscured by the shadow of one arm, though as the flames flared upward, an eye glinted for a moment beneath the filmy mat of his hair.

It was then Treve became aware of a dull ache in his left arm and saw that the sleeve was punctured. His eyes widened in horror at the sight of two even marks as though a serpent had bitten him during the night. No wonder he had dreamed as he had! Already the pain was spreading into the shoulder and across his chest.

Lo-ar watched later as Treve boiled a poultice of the herbs he carried with him. "You did not cover yourself as you slept," the old man said. "And this is a wild place." He shook his head.

Treve nodded absently as he stirred the gluey mess in the pot. His final dream had been so real, coming as it did on the heels of a nightmare, and he could not get it out of his mind. Somehow he was sure the moonlit figure had been that of a woman or a girl and she had been trying to speak to him.

Later, though Treve swayed with dizziness, Lo-ar insisted that they resume their journey. "You may grow worse," he told Treve. "And here on the edge of the hills, there are none to aid us."

Somehow they got Fog saddled, though it was Treve who now had to ride. The beggar walked ahead, holding the reins while Treve hung on, barely able to raise his head. So it was that the choosing of the way was left to Lo-ar.

Near midmorning, their road narrowed and began to run parallel to the mountains, climbing and dipping and drawing no nearer to the sea. After a time, Treve's head cleared and he took the reins himself. His tiny wound still pained him as though it festered, yet he dared to hope that the worst was past.

"We must halt soon," Lo-ar said at last. "Lest your fever return."

"Are we not near any of the towns, then?" Treve asked. "Is not this the searoad?"

"The road curves to avoid the marshes," Lo-ar said, looking away and smiling faintly.

Treve shook his muddled head. Lo-ar's words had reminded him that he was thirsty

and he squinted upward at the overcast sky. It had grown very warm, and somehow, without his noticing, a great mass of cloud had moved in from the west and blotted out the sun.

Treve became dizzy again, and his senses drifted away so that he barely knew it when Lo-ar took Fog's reins from his slackened fingers. It no longer mattered. His shoulder throbbed, his eyes blurred and the landscape seemed to shift about in the pallid light until he dared not keep his gaze on any object for long lest it change to something else.

There were no more cottages to be seen, though to one side, the remains of a tumbled stone wall reared in grotesque shapes. Here Treve could have sworn he saw a man's face, crowned with ragged white flowers, there a maiden's shoulder, and beyond — surely a prick-eared terrier! Yet nothing moved and he knew somehow that these were no more than shattered stones worked upon by his sickness. Yet the forms recurred, taking on nightmare shapes until Treve closed his eyes and groaned aloud.

Lo-ar paused presently beside the ruins of a house and drew water from a well. "You'll not get over that bite so easily," he said to Treve, though his voice held something that seemed to mock. "Rest you then and I will care for the horse."

Treve sank to the ground where he drifted into a half sleep. Amid his dreams, he thought he heard hoofbeats but it was too much effort to wake — even though the dim, starlit figure beside him would continue to grasp his good arm with pale hands.

"Rise, good traveller," a voice whispered. "Wake. For you are in deadly peril."

Half-rousing, Treve clutched a gossamer sleeve. "Who . . . ?" he croaked.

"One who wishes you well," the voice replied. "One who would befriend you."

Suddenly, the figure was cuffed aside, and for a long, dreaming time, Treve felt something dark brooding above him, watching and waiting until he slept once more. His fever burned even in his dreams and the wound on his arm began to throb in time to his heartbeat. Once more, wolf jaws clutched and worried at his flesh, dragging him up a steep slope to the waiting darkness of his lair.

Treve managed to fight free, moving in the slow uncertain way of dreams, but

no sooner had he pried the jaws from his arm than he was seized again, this time beneath that same arm. He cried out hoarsely, rousing himself as he felt those teeth scrape across his ribs.

He woke suddenly to a new day that was darker and more ominous than the one before it. His head ached and his whole left side felt as though he had indeed been savaged by an animal. The poison, he thought in a moment of clarity, must be spreading.

But on the burning screen of his eyelids, he saw a face. The sweet promise of those luminous eyes, the chastely drawn-back hair, and that red mouth, almost made him forget his sickness. A white hand reached for his and he saw the gleam of steel — some weapon — half-hidden there.

"Tonight," the voice whispered. "Have courage."

And then Lo-ar gripped him roughly and the vision was gone. "Drink," the old man said, thrusting a cup of the well's cool water beneath Treve's nose.

Treve drank and slowly his head cleared. He remembered something from the evening before. "Fog?" he whispered. "My horse?"

"He's run off," the beggar told him. "Didn't want the likes of me caring for him."

For the first time, Treve realized that he at least, no longer minded the old man's touch. It occurred to him also, that he who had offered succor to the old beggar now lived by the kindness of that same beggar — and it might be, if he did not survive this illness, that at the end, Lo-ar would perform that one final and most intimate service for him — the digging of his grave.

But now the beggar was urging Treve to his feet. "We cannot stay here," he said. "We must seek shelter at least, and yon house has fallen in."

"Are we lost, then?"

"Lost? Nay." But again, Lo-ar looked away and Treve thought he was hiding another of his thin smiles. But that must have been the venom, clouding his senses. He staggered to his feet, leaning heavily on Lo-ar. The beggar was, beneath his rags, a stronger man than Treve had thought, and certainly no older than a hale, if unkempt, fifty.

They set off and soon the road became a track. An occasional stretch of crum-

bled paving stones suggested that once things had been otherwise, but that time was past.

The sky sagged above them, gravid with roiling darkines — the promise of foul weather to come. As they stumbled to a halt for what must have been the dozenth time, Treve saw that the afternoon had faded already into evening. A hopeless dream came on him as though the night had but hidden behind the shadowed day and now he sank to the ground and lay where he had fallen, scarcely rousing as Lo-ar laid his cloak over him. Rough grasses were crushed beneath his cheek and he breathed in the smell of their green sap until sleep came and the dream with it.

This time, Treve and the wolf were nearly within the shadow of the overhang, even though in his delirium, he knew that this could not be real. Those impossible, crowding stars — how could he reconcile them with the thunder which boomed across the distant hills? Where now were the clouds of the previous day?

The sky spun, the wolf bit deeper into Treve's side, cracking one of his ribs with a sickening snap as the fangs reached inward for his heart. He gasped, though he dared not struggle with those teeth in him. Thunder rumbled again and beyond the rise of the hillside, a shimmering figure hailed him silently. Treve turned his eyes to her face in desperation, unable to cry out as he saw the blade in her hand. Abruptly, she threw it.

The world seemed to shift until suddenly the awful pain diminished and became the lesser ache of his bite. Clawed hands clutched Treve beneath one arm as he was dragged forward with inhuman strength, toward the cave. In the suddenly starless night, he smelled the old beggar and the stench told him more, now that he was free of the dreamspell, than he could have known before.

They did indeed approach the deeper darkness of an overhang, and from beyond, drifted the reek of ancient corruption mingling with that of his companion. Lightning flared and in that stark incandescence Treve saw the squared doorway, lettered above this same antique script, and knew now that was — a tomb. Lo-ar's tomb.

He struck out blindly and only then realized he held in his hand the shining blade thrown to him in a dream. He heard

a choked snarl and saw plainly how Lo-ar's eyes shone like green fires in the darkness.

The lightning came again as he wrestled with the beggar and this time, Lo-ar smiled fully to reveal a set of gleaming fangs. As the creature's filthy claws released Treve and scrambled upward toward his eyes, Treve stabbed again and again until he reached the heart of the thing.

There came a sound like a hollow pop and something rattled in the darkness like dry sticks. Choking dust billowed upward as Treve flung his burden from him. The old man's skull cracked against the rock and Treve grew sick with loathing, glad he could not see. He had lost the weapon — and it seemed to him now that his hands where he had grasped Lo-ar's body would never be clean again.

He backed away until he felt the stone wall grinding against his spine and then eased himself into a crouch, eyes wide as he sought to pierce the darkness. At first it seemed he could not bear to think of what lay before him — that he must see the worst. But when the lightning flared once more, he squeezed his eyes shut instinctively, lest he see what he had killed and go mad.

"Warrior!" came a glad voice and Treve dared glance upward to behold the shining form of his benefactress. "You have killed my enemy," she said. "Though he fed on you — yet have you survived and wrought his downfall."

Treve swallowed. The woman was so fair that he felt clumsy and earthbound beside her and wondered that he had ever dared touch her hand.

"Bid me come to you," she called and smiled with her lips together.

Treve closed his eyes, one hand moving absently to press upon the mark of Lo-ar's bite. "Was it you," he asked loudly, "who fled that day when I first came upon Lo-ar?"

"Yes, it was. I was not strong enough to destroy him. And then he drew on your strength later. But now" She made and impatient movement. "Call me to you. Invite me . . ."

"No," Treve told her with real regret and, despite her pleas, he would speak no more words to her.

All that night he crouched before the mouth of Lo-ar's tomb, while the rain soaked him and then drew back before a chilly wind which tore away the clouds. She called to him and sang to him as he

clutched his small wound in silence, gripping the torn flesh until he bit his lip to keep from crying out. But he neither looked at her nor answered her.

Near dawn, she vanished with one last cry of reproach and Treve, averting his eyes from what had been Lo-ar, stumbled back down the hill to their last campsite. He whistled and called and was at last rewarded by Fog's distant whinny.

He greeted Fog warmly, laying one cheek against the horse's neck until he had strength enough to mount. He had to use his cloak for a pad since the saddle had been left behind during his and Lo-ar's wanderings. That seemed a small enough loss now.

Yet something held him back when he would have ridden away — as though some duty remained undone. Treve glanced behind him and upward to behold rank upon rank of tomb-crowned hills. In the clear light of day, the ruins of the necropolis lay all around him.

He lay one hand, as though for reassurance, on Fog's warm neck. In one of yonder tombs, she would be sleeping — fitfully, perhaps — or maybe she lay awake and wept for him. Though she could manifest herself by day if she chose — for had she not done it? — she did not appear now. He wondered whether it was his will that kept him away — or hers.

He gripped the reins tightly and stared down at his fingers. They were long and tanned, crossed with the scars of too many battles — like other men's hands, he supposed, in all ways but one. He looked away. Dared he let her live? Had the woman truly wished him well, or would she too have fed upon him? Did he turn aside now out of fear of one who truly offered friendship?

In the end, he turned his back on the place and rode away. Such friendship was not for mortals, and he knew it well. And how could he who had scarce survived the ruin of his cursed homeland judge another's right to exist?

But later, on the road to the sea, he dreamed of her as she had been, ages gone. And in the way of his people, his dreams were true.

THE WALLS OF JERICHO

By Ed Shannon

The crack of thunder died and when the earth's trembling steadied I could see that the ground fell away into a monstrous chasm. Above the nearest rocks the walls climbed out one after the other, stretching until they faded into a single shifting, distant dot. I saw the book on its stand and the confusion rushed over me like the walls that towered on either side. Just moments ago these walls of rock had been shelves of books lining my study. Now, I faced the angry, twisting stone. Gone were the silent ribbed rows of books. The ancient, dusty, crumbling relic that had rested on my footstool now shone and glimmered its golden edges on a golden stand. Then I heard the rattling of metal on stone.

It, no — *he* — for it was monstrously, obviously male, was chained to the edge of the cliff. Two sets of chains held him. One, attached just below the edge of the path, the other, attached some twenty feet down the face of the cliff, would let him fall that twenty feet and climb just short of the path. He could just rest the tips of his fingers in the cracks below the path that would along the distances of the chasm. His breathing echoed around me.

"You're trapped, you know," he rasped. I knelt and looked down into his eyes. Stark brilliant silver, so different from the browns and greys of the rock and sky, from the colors of his flesh, of his scales, of his hide. His beard twisted itself into the chains and he grimaced when he spoke or moved his head. I refused to consider the shapes of his body. I wanted out. I wanted to be back where things like him did not exist, but I didn't know how. I didn't know how I got here. I didn't know what to do, so I followed the old adage and played dumb.

"So, where am I?" I could feel myself trembling and I fought my nerves, my nausea, trying to look calm.

"Let's just call it my own personal hell." He chuckled a little. At least I think it was a chuckle. In his glowing eyes, I could see the pain as his beard caught in the chains and then pulled at his flesh.

"How did I get here? I remember reading a book, but that's all."

"Like the one on the stand?" I could hear the anticipation in his voice. Nodding my head, I eased myself back an inch or two and decided to play it care-

ful. He wasn't just horrifying; he was dangerous.

"I thought they'd all been destroyed — the originals, at least. It almost doesn't seem possible. Someone finally came." He shifted his limbs — I couldn't call them hands; they weren't hands — and let the left one hold his weight. He was appraising me, making judgments. We were both wondering what I would do, what I could do.

"Why would anyone destroy the books?" Dumb, I thought, play dumb, play for time. I had to know what the game was before I could win.

"They didn't understand. They were afraid of what they didn't understand." His English was strange, oddly accented. Half growl of dog, half rumbling lion, his voice rubbed itself inside my bones.

"What language is it?" I asked, pointing to the book. "I'm a linguist, but I've never seen it before."

"You wouldn't recognize it or understand. It's my language, the old language. The words you spoke brought you here. Al Azif, the book of romance . . . no, the book of ancient magic. That's what you would call it."

"I'd been studying the book for days and nothing happened. Why this sudden transportation?"

"Had you spoken the words aloud before?" His mouth twisted into an odd imitation of a grin, and I shivered like a gazelle as his voice cracked like a jackal . . . or a hyena.

"No, I've been trying to translate, to find patterns. Spoken orally?"

It seemed simple, if words could bring me here, they could take me back. But what words? I had to con him. I had to find the right words, but something in me so old that I didn't know it was there made me terrified of him. He would destroy me if he could. He wanted the chains gone. I didn't want to stay here. I didn't much care to die — or take his place here. He wanted to trap me. I had to trap him.

"What words did I say? How could they make this happen?" Stall for time, it was all I could do.

"I can't say them, or they would send me to a place worse than this. The book is the collected magic of my people. We were ancient before you ever even were. The book is power. You have an original,

you could control your world with it. If you knew how."

Feint. He had to appear gullible.

"What do I have to say to go back, to go home?"

He just let himself hang there and stared at me. I could almost hear him thinking, but I had some planning to do myself. Whoever had put him here had not been playing games.

"If I tell you, what are you going to do about me? I want out of here too, and you are the only one that can help me." Listening to him, I could hear cracks shrilling, and I didn't know if it meant doom or salvation.

"Tell me what to do and we'll talk it over."

The roar that poured out of him shook me and I grabbed a boulder to stop myself sliding off.

"No. I know what you need to know and I won't tell you unless you release me first."

I wasn't surprised, but I wasn't sure what to do. I knew one thing — I couldn't let him loose.

"Why don't you trust me? I haven't done anything to you."

"Your kind put me here. Never will I trust you. You pathetic, weak creatures. Release me and I will reward you."

"Why did they put you here? What did you do?"

He slowed his breathing, brought his anger back under control. The wheels were turning. I waited for his ploy.

"I was different. You find me revolting, don't you? They did, too. Should I be hated, should I suffer, just for being different?"

A good ploy. I still needed time, so I gave him room to set up his plan. I was in no position to do anything but react. I kept trying to remember that if humans had defeated him before, maybe I could do it too.

"All right, life isn't fair, but we have to work something out. You know the rules. What do you think we should do?"

He looked me over carefully. I could see the contempt in his eyes. Somehow, some way, I was going to teach this creature a lesson.

"Turn to the page marked with seven moons. Then the fourth page from there. Read the third spell."

"What happens when I read it?" I knew that whatever he said would be a lie, but

I needed to find a way to manipulate him. "It's a simple spell. You will be able to perceive whether or not I am telling you the truth or lying to you. Then you will be able to trust me and we can both get out of here."

I turned to the page and studied the words. I was sure that, if I read these words aloud, if I said them correctly, I wouldn't like the results. But what could I do? If I read them, I was dead. If not? I was trapped. I had to try. I flipped the book and began reading the first group of words that I saw. He screamed, and the sky began to glow like fire.

"You fool!" he screamed. "Let go of the book!"

Just because he told me not to, I hung on for dear life. The sky began to explode and the rocks around me began to grow. Then, as I was thrown to my back, I could see the walls above growing thicker, larger. On top of the highest of the series of growing walls, a new one came to life and burst in a glorious spasm, full, towering, and complete. After the tremors had quieted, I turned and he was gone. I could have kicked myself. I had let him loose after all, I was dead.

I scrambled, searching, trying to find him. Then, I heard chains rattling and he pulled himself up to the edge and glared at me. I had to take the initiative.

"What should I read next? What else happens? Maybe I'll pick a passage that will bury us alive."

His breathing echoed and echoed. He really couldn't trust me now. I wasn't really any better off, but we were on equal terms. He knew that I wasn't going to roll over and play dead.

"So, he hissed, 'You still don't trust me, do you? Well, rot! You can sit there and die. I'm not going to help you unless you release me first.'"

He eased himself back down the chain. I stepped up and watched him resting. Stalemate. I was stuck. If I couldn't trick him, I had to figure out how to escape myself. I opened the book and began to try to find another way to use it.

The seven moons marked a section. The spell that had brought me here was in the three moon section. The one that he had told me to read and the one I had read were in the seven moons. If I had read the one he wanted, he would have been released. Seven moons had to

change his conditions in this chasm. Three moons changed locations. It made sense. Marked by chapters. What didn't make sense was that, if he knew the book well enough to pick a spell he wanted, he should be able to escape just by saying the words. What would the other spells do? Gold? Women? I wasn't about to take any chances. I knew one spell was safe to use, so I tried an experiment. I knew enough about the occult to be willing to take a chance. I braced myself against the rocks and began to read.

When the tremors stopped, I looked up and smiled. The chains and his yelling turned me to face him.

"What the hell are you trying to do? Eventually, those walls will fall in and crush us, you idiot. You don't know what you're doing. Just leave the book alone."

I was going to find out just how safe I was when, maybe if, my plan worked.

"If you know this book so well, why don't you just say the words and get yourself out? Maybe you have to have the book physically in your hands?"

The way he glared at me convinced me I was right. I could see the green of his manacles turning yellow as he strained against the chains that held him. And I began to feel less apprehensive.

"That's why you're chained, isn't it? So you can't reach the book. And the book is part of the hell, isn't it? Salvation and revenge, always there, just beyond reach. With the way the walls stack, one on another, others have added walls, haven't they? Did they come here and escape? Or did they make new walls from somewhere else just to torture you?"

He was cringing. He wasn't defeated, but he was down and I was kicking him as hard as I could.

"You are the first. No one else has ever come here before. To see the book and not be able to use it has been the worst. And you had to hold onto it, didn't you? If you had dropped it during the earthquake, it would have come to me and I would be free."

"Stays with whoever holds it, doesn't it?"

"You knew that or you wouldn't have held on to it."

I had it now. I had everything. I could escape and trap him so he would never escape. The book had to be an original. A copy worked, but it wasn't as powerful, as effective as an original. If my plan

worked, I would have two originals, maybe the only ones surviving.

"No, I didn't. I just held on because you told me no."

I could hear his despair then. I could hear it echo across the chasm and bounce away in both directions. I smiled.

"You see," I told him. "We have forgotten your kind. At least most of us have. Those who haven't remember you in stories, in nightmares. Part of us remembers and feels the fear, but part of us loves that fear, because some ancient consciousness deep inside knows, somehow, that you are no threat. We know that you are forever trapped, forever tortured, forever frustrated. We know the name of this book. Lovecraft did, at least. If he didn't remember the real name, what he used will suffice. Even if very really believed, it was a part of our innermost memories and we, many of us, were drawn to memories disguised as stories."

"One mistake was made. The ones who used your powers against you didn't believe that we would ever forget. The memories were too recent, too powerful then. They didn't think anyone would be foolish enough to use the book and let a few copies survive. Oh, they destroyed all but one, but copies were made. Lovecraft was able to trace hints and rumors of them. Even copies were few in number, and they don't work as well, do they? The copies don't have the real power. I found one, an original, in Ireland, in the land of the ancient Druids. They helped defeat you, didn't they? And the Irish love their books. Someone saved a book and I found it in a digging near Tara, the place of ancient Kings. Lovecraft was sure that the originals had all been destroyed. Maybe another copy survived? Does that give you any hope? Maybe the next one of us who comes, you will be able to trick them? Maybe you will come back and bring our nightmares to life again?"

I let him think about that for a minute while I stood and opened the book. He had some hope. I wasn't nice enough to take all of his hope away. I wanted him to hope and suffer disappointment after disappointment. I wanted this abomination to suffer and suffer some more. Just being trapped forever wasn't enough. He had to believe that he might defeat us and in that belief suffer even more. What worse hell than one without escape, but with the hope of escape?

"Their mistake, my ancestors, was to leave the book here. Anyone foolish enough to use the book and come here deserves to be trapped. You see, they won't hold the book as they travel. I didn't. It's too heavy. I, like any other human, would just leave it on the table and read it there. I am taking this book with me. If any originals of the book survive, you are going to be very lucky if they are actually holding the book. Very lucky indeed."

I turned to the three moons and found the spell that I wanted.

"You don't know the spell and I'll never tell you, human! You are as doomed as I am. You will never escape. You will die here and I will laugh as I watch your bones turn to dust and blow away!"

I smiled as condescending a smile as I could manage.

"Three moons, second page, first spell. That's the one that brought me here. You said that if I read it again, I would go to a place worse than this. If I put my foot on your chain, you'll go with me, won't you?"

I walked to the edge and touched my shoe to the chain. He began to scream and jerk at his chains. I stepped back smiling.

But I don't want your company. This is where you belong. I wouldn't want you to feel homesick."

As I began to read the words, his terror grew. He knew that I had figured it out. He begged me that I leave the book, that I not go. With one word to speak, I grasped the book firmly, looked into his eyes and smiled. I could see his pain, his desperation. And in as humane a voice possible, I laughed and spoke the last word.

I heard a crack of thunder and was in my arm chair. One book, shiny and new, was in my hands, the other, dusty and crumbling, rested on the footstool in front of me. The fire still blazed and I began to work.

At this moment, it is two a.m. I am almost done with this account. I have but two things to do. After I finish this, I will burn both copies of the book. I will not write its true name. You will know at least one of its many names. Then, I will prepare this manuscript for submission. I will not, however, leave the book totally destroyed. I will spread one of the spells with the publication of this manuscript. I have tried to make it possible for

the reader to say the words by translating the characters into sounds we can mimic:

HARSTRACK SOLITQEP SYF JHLYK
DFLKJHAGKL DFLOSJKH IUYIU MYB
ZXPOCX XZCKLL IYEWJHLKCYGG
AYIR

The spell is from the seven moons. If you read the words, a new wall will grow around him. The chasm will grow. Or, if you, as I did the second time, read it backwards, a wall will retract itself. That is how I escaped. I read the spell that took me there backwards.

Read it either way. He will believe that someone has found a copy of the book. He will hope that they will find the right spell and come for a visit. When no one comes, he will feel deeper and deeper despair. Perhaps, if we read it forward enough times, perhaps the walls will come tumbling down. Play the game with the walls of Jericho. Help make hell just a little worse place to spend eternity.

Cross to Bear By Wayne Allen Sallee

Jesus had his; Briefcase in hand, I struggle to read the paper without losing balance, trying to avoid the mob of angry commuters that circle me.



Dream Looking Down At Its Nightmare Face

By Glenn Sheldon

The suicidal man walked out
my window; he eased humidity
into a downward spiraltail.

On the floor, the man's clothes
were neatly folded next to
my new set of stainless steel knives.

I leaned over the windowsill; red sap
pooled from his head against
black granite, under black sky.

My first long look at the night.

A Fly in June

By Wayne Allen Sallee

actually a dead fly
in a summer pool
of splashing children

not a particularly stupid fly
this bug fought, an errant
branch clutched in a feeler
death grip

dead at high noon Saturday
in a Friday to Sunday life
is my life this short
to my gods?

a four day holiday
weekend if I
fight?



Old Memories

By Dwight E. Humphries

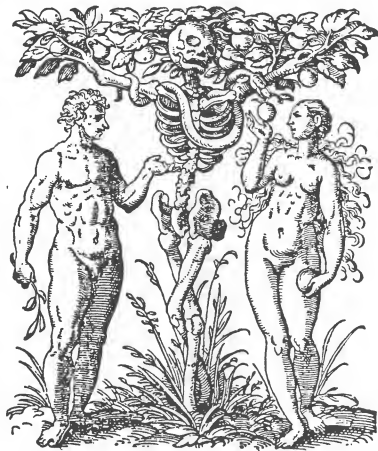
Old memories,
Friends and lovers
Trickle from my hands;
They have spoken their
Deepest dreams,
Words and images
Of varied hue are
Given of my heart . . .
Yet my dreams
Are nightmare legions,
Complex and infinitely dark.

Despair's somber shade
King of a ghastly realm,
I have stood alone
In battle dusk,
My frame anger trembled,
An aspen sapling caught
In a gust of hot wind,
Birch pale, razor's edge
Keen and cold.
My ears, eyes are blood filled
In a clash with Death itself,
A struggle in time's ruins.

I am a weapon alive
Grasped in hands
That cannot touch
Yesterday or tomorrow.

They are gone —
Gone as the riches I had,
Heart coffer looted, empty.
I stand in bitter dark,
The quiet a truce of the slain
Yet I am unafraid — there
Is a peaceful longing
And a freshness
About hope's grave.

Some things Man Wasn't meant to know



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MRS. McVAY CELEBRATES AN ANNIVERSARY

By David Starkey

To Charlie and Mick, it certainly looked like the beginning of a long, rotten summer.

First of all, they were the only two people left in the house. Everyone else had goofed off just as much as they had, but when final grades came out, nobody else had flunked three courses except for Charlie and Mick. And while their fraternity brothers had tried to be sympathetic, they all seemed to think that everything had worked out just fine. Instead of leaving the house empty over the summer, Charlie and Mick would stay there and go to summer school. Charlie and Mick would keep the grass mowed. Charlie and Mick would make the place look lived in, and that way, all the guys would be able to leave their stuff behind and not worry about it being stolen while they were away.

But in spite of all the words of encouragement and gratitude they'd received, Charlie and Mick were not pleased with the outlook for the summer. Not only were they left in the house by themselves, not only was the campus totally devoid of any kind of social activity during the summer, not only did they *really* have to study, they were both flat broke. Neither of their parents were willing to foot the bill for an extra session of school simply because their lazy offspring had spent the last year partying instead of studying. Charlie and Mick both realized that they were going to have to get part-time jobs.

After the first day of summer school, they combined the last of their meager funds, climbed into Mick's car, and headed for the grocery store.

Charlie talked Mick into buying some beer, and they decided to ride around town for a while before going home to study. They were near the edge of town when they drove past a big Victorian house, and Charlie saw a wooden sign wired onto the wobbly wooden fence that surrounded the lawn. "Wanted," the sign said. "Someone to do yard work. \$20 per hour."

"Jesus!" said Charlie. "Stop the car! I think we just found ourselves a job."

Mick stopped the car in front of the house, and they walked up the crumbling brick sidewalk toward the front porch. The house was very big, but no longer as impressive as it surely must have been.

The paint was chipping off, the shutters were cracked, and many of them were missing hinges. The lawn was big and rambling and choked with overgrown shrubbery.

Mick and Charlie climbed the stairs onto the porch, checked themselves to make sure they looked presentable, cursed themselves for smelling vaguely of beer, and then decided to go ahead and knock anyway.

No time at all, a woman appeared at the front door.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Mrs. Abigail McVay. Are you here about the lawn?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Mick. "We saw your . . ."

She opened the door and smiled warmly. "Come inside. Come right on in."

She led them to the lavishly furnished living room, told them to sit down, and then looked at them silently for a few seconds.

"Well," she said. "You seem like nice young men. I'd like you to mow the lawn and trim the shrubbery. I'll supply the lawn mower and the trimmers. I'll pay you each \$20.00 per hour. If that's agreeable, you're hired."

"Great!" said Mick, looking at Charlie as if to say that this was the fastest job interview he'd ever had. "Thank you," Mick added. "We'll do a good job. You'll see."

"I'm sure you will," said Mrs. McVay. Then she offered them hotcakes and syrup.

"Er, no thanks," said Mick, looking a bit bewildered by the offer. "We've got dinner in the car. We just bought groceries. We've . . ."

"So what?" Mrs. McVay said cheerfully. "It won't take a minute. Your groceries will keep, won't they?"

"Well," said Charlie, "we do have some frozen stuff."

"It'll be just fine," she said knowingly. "I'll have you out of here in no time. Besides, if you don't stay for hotcakes and syrup, I'll be hurt. Please," she said. "Stay."

"Love to," Mick said diplomatically.

The first mound of hotcakes was six high. She put a plate in front of each of her guests in the big, dimly lit dining room. "Hotcakes," she said, "are my favorite food. Here, have some syrup."

She passed a small ceramic pitcher to

Mick.

Mick looked at the pitcher and winced. It was pink, and shaped like an odd little troll with its mouth wide open. Its lower lip formed the spout of the pitcher, and a long braided lock of ceramic hair formed the handle.

Mick hesitantly picked up the pitcher, and found that it was empty.

"Oh my," she said. "Oh my, my, my. I'll get some more. I'll be right back."

She grabbed the pitcher and hurried off to the kitchen. The door swung closed behind her.

Charlie looked at Mick and grinned. "This is weird, man. Really weird."

Mick nodded and put his finger to his lips.

She rushed back through the doorway carrying the pitcher.

"There," she said, handing the pitcher to Mick. "Help yourself."

Mick lifted the pitcher by its braided handle and started pouring the syrup onto his hotcakes. But as soon as the syrup started coming out, he gasped and stopped pouring. The syrup was red. It looked like several drops of blood had splattered onto the surface of the uppermost hotcake.

"Oh, sorry about *that*," chirped Mrs. McVay. "The syrup is really a wonderful amber color — just the proper color for good syrup. The lighting in this room has always been very strange. It makes things appear different than they really are."

And to prove her point, she lifted Mick's water goblet and held it near the bottom of the chandelier.

"See," said Mrs. McVay. "Doesn't the water look blue when it's near the chandelier?"

The water didn't look any different to either Mick or Charlie than it had looked when the glass had been sitting on the table.

"And see how clear it looks when it's on the table!" she asked. She lowered the goblet and set it back at Mick's place.

The water looked just the same. But to Mick and Charlie, that didn't really seem to matter. For what they were both keenly aware of that moment was the *smell* coming from the trollish pitcher, and from the top of Mick's hotcakes. The smell was wonderful. Intoxicatingly sweet. And warm, the odor of delicate spices, of likewid sugars. It was irresistible.

Mick poured a generous portion of the

red syrup onto his hotcakes, and then he passed the pitcher to Charlie. Charlie emptied it over his stack, watching syrup ooze over the edges of the cakes onto his plate like a creamy, blood-red glaze.

The pancakes were good. But the syrup was incredible — sublime, sweet, and subtle, with just the hint of a flavor that could only be described as the smell that rain makes when it falls at the end of a steamy summer day.

They had each finished their third stack of pancakes when she asked if they wanted more.

"No, no," they said, holding their aching bellies.

"Well," said Mrs. McVay. "How about if I just pour some of the syrup into your glasses? The syrup is the best part anyway, isn't it? The hotcakes are just a feeble excuse to eat the syrup, now aren't they?"

"Yes, I guess they are," said Mick, a bit surprised at his own directness. "Thank you. I'd certainly like some more syrup."

"Me too," said Charlie. "Thanks."

So she filled their glasses, and they drank greedily. She kept refilling as she talked, periodically rushing into the kitchen to refill the pitcher, and then hurrying back into the dining room.

"You boys certainly look strong and healthy," she said. "I'm certain that you're the right boys for the job."

"We are, ma'am," said Charlie. He held out his empty glass toward the pitcher.

"It surely is difficult being house-bound, like I am," she said. "This is the fifth house that's been built on this site. Did you know that?"

No, ma'am," said Mick. "Can I have some more syrup, please?"

She refilled his glass as she talked.

"I can't leave this property, you know. I'm bound to this spot by some stupid rule that I'm not allowed to bend. Oh, I've had my fun over the years. I'm afraid I haven't been very nice to various people who have tried to live on my land. But now, there's nobody here except me. I can't have any fun these days. Besides," she said, "I want access to the whole town this year. It's my anniversary, you know."

Both boys were in a kind of stupor now, focusing only on the taste of the syrup, barely hearing her words.

"Do you boys think it's possible to hate an entire town?" she suddenly asked. "To hold a grudge for so long that all you want to do is destroy everyone that lives there?"

"Sure, sure," they nodded agreeably, eagerly awaiting the next sip of syrup.

"I thought you'd understand," said Mrs. McVay. "Oh dear," she said suddenly, "I'm afraid there's no more syrup."

Both boys looked as if they were about to burst into tears.

"There, there," she said. "Don't you fret. You'll have more . . . lots more."

Charlie thrust his tongue into his empty glass to lick out the last crimson droplets which clung to the sides.

"So you'll start tomorrow?" she asked them.

"Sure," they said eagerly.

Once they got back to the fraternity house, Mick and Charlie felt a bit ashamed of themselves, as if they had both been performing an immoral act at the same time, and they had seen each other doing it. But it was this sense that they were both somehow guilty of the same crime that seemed to bring them closer together. The truth was that Mick and Charlie had never been all that fond of one another. Charlie was too loud and inclined to brag. Mick was quiet, diplomatic and modest. Mick had thought Charlie was a loud bore, and Charlie thought Mick was a snob.

But once they were back in their own kitchen, old animosities seemed petty and irrelevant. They felt, for some reason they couldn't really pinpoint, that they were suddenly much more alike than they were different.

"What exactly went on tonight?" Charlie asked. "My stomach is killing me. We must have eaten two dozen pancakes a piece. My stomach's about to pop. Why did we eat so damn much?"

"The syrup," Mick said quietly. "Damn, it was good, wasn't it?"

"Good?" said Charlie. "Damn, it was fantastic. I'd drink a whole gallon right now if I could."

Mick nodded. His stomach was aching. He was absolutely stuffed. But, given the chance, he knew he could certainly make room for some more of that incredible syrup.

"She'll feed us again tomorrow," Mick said. "She said she'd get some more syrup."

"God, I hope," said Charlie. "Say, you wanna study English with me? You're a lot better at that crap than I am."

"Sure," Mick said. "We're in this mess together, aren't we? We both gotta wake

thru the same shit. I'll get my book."

They studied until 11.00. And then they both admitted it at the same time. They were starving. They were absolutely ravenous.

"How 'bout a pizza?" asked Charlie.

"Where?" asked Mick. "Everywhere closes up at 8 o' clock in the summer. Besides, I'm not really in the mood for pizza."

"Yeah," said Charlie. "Me, either. But what I could really use is some of Mrs. McVay's pancakes."

Mick laughed a bit nervously, as though his friend had just asked him to share an underage girl with him in the same bed at the same time. "Yeah," said Mick. "Some of her pancakes and a gallon of that syrup."

They heard a dog barking in the backyard just then, and they both jumped and turned eagerly toward the kitchen window.

They both had the same bizarre thought, but neither of them had the nerve to tell the other what it was.

"How about settling for some cold cereal?" asked Mick.

"Yeah," said Charlie. "I'll get the milk."

Mick stopped the car in front of Mrs. McVay's house at 2 pm the next day. He and Charlie noticed that the wooden sign advertising the job had been removed. They hurried up the walk, bounded up the stairs, and knocked on the front door.

They had talked about it most of the day. They were going to ask her for some syrup before they started the lawn work. They really wanted the syrup first. God she had to give it to them first. It was so good.

But there was no answer. No one came to the door. It was a hot, muggy day, but all the windows were tightly closed. Mick looked in through the front window. He couldn't see any furniture inside the living room.

"Hey, Charlie," he said. "Look at this. All the furniture's gone."

Charlie was just getting ready to take a look when a beat-up old pickup truck stopped in front of the house. Painted on the side of the truck was "Harley's Lawn Service."

An old man climbed out of the truck and stood looking at Mick and Charlie.

"Something you boys need?" the old man asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, we were supposed to mow this lawn and do some pruning."

The old man ambled up the walk toward them.

"I've been mowing this lawn for the last twenty years," he said. "Who told you to mow it?"

"Abigail McVay," said Mick. "She told us to . . ."

"You boys get out of here," said the old man. "You think I'm some kind of fool? Just get out of here. Or I'm calling the sheriff."

"But she hired us," said Charlie. "She hired us to take care of the lawn."

"Damn you college boys and your damn jokes. Don't you think I've heard all the Abigail McVay stories that have ever been told? Abigail McVay's been dead for 400 years — burned as a witch on this very spot 400 years ago yesterday. Everybody around here knows that. She was the only person ever burned as a witch in the state of Mississippi. And there's a hundred stories about this property — all of 'em God-damn lies. And I'm getting sick and tired of 'em. This house has been empty for twenty years, and the bank pays me to tend the lawn. Nobody will buy this place because there's too many stories floating around. Too many lies. Too many kids like you telling your crazy stories. I've worked at this place for twenty years and I've never seen a God-damn thing! There's nothing wrong with this place, and there never has been. Now get out of here right now. And keep your lies to yourself."

Mick and Charlie headed down the stairs, gave the old man a wide berth, climbed into Mick's car, and left.

They were only mildly disturbed by the revelation that they seemed to have spent the previous evening talking with a woman that had been burned 400 years ago. But what truly disturbed them was the dual realization that they were not going to have any more of her syrup, and that they were ravenous.

Mick was driving. He was clenching the steering wheel as if it were a serpent that he was trying to choke to death.

"Damn it!" He said. "Damn it! I'm hungry!"

"Same here," said Charlie. "Jesus, I was looking forward to that syrup."

"There must be something that tastes that good," said Mick. "There's gotta be something that tastes even a little bit like

it."

They both saw the teenage boy walking along the side of the road. Neither of them was at all surprised when Mick veered toward the boy and neatly slammed the fender into the boy's back and then rolled the car over him.

Mick stopped the car, and Charlie got out, picked up the dead boy and threw him in the trunk.

Then they went back to the frat house.

The flavor was very close to the one they were seeking. Very close. But it wasn't quite the same.

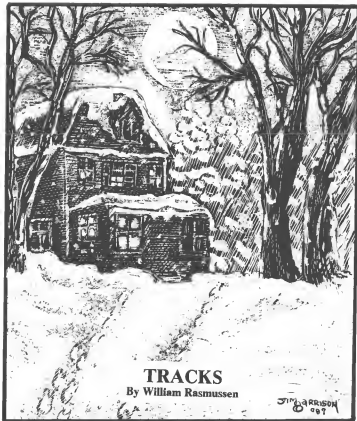
But they didn't give up that easily.

Maybe the next one," they always said. Maybe the next one would have the proper flavor. And when the next one wasn't right, then perhaps the one after that would be closer. And when that one wasn't the one, well, then surely the next one would be right.

Their foraging continued as the summer lumbered on. Mick and Charlie mowed lawns, attended classes, studied, and grew more and more skillful at gathering their prey. A twelve-year old girl. The Baptist church minister and his wife. A waitress. A retired school principal. The police were baffled, terrified, and completely ineffective as the boys persisted in the search for the elusive flavor.

As the summer drew to a close, Mick and Charlie were like the same person, having the same need, the same want, the same love. They reassured themselves often that they would not give up, and they were encouraged by the thought that, in a few more days, Fall would begin, and their fraternity brothers would be coming back to them.





He found the tracks that morning. It had snowed the night before, the first storm of the season; a light, powdery snow that covered the surrounding area in a beautiful, pristine mantle of white . . . except for the tracks. Meandering from the edge of the forest — about a hundred yards away — to the rear of the house and back, they pockmarked his vast grounds like a neat, miniature mine field, and completely destroyed the otherwise pervading feeling of peace and serenity outside. The tracks were so starkly defined it appeared that they had literally been carved out of the snow by an expert craftsman. But Stephen knew that was not the case. He plodded over through the six inch powder to examine them more closely.

They were large prints that strangely seemed to exhibit both human as well as animal characteristics; long tread, unusually wide sole (even for a bear), and two peculiarly lengthy digits for toes that gave the foot an almost cloven appear-

ance. Stephen was downright baffled about the mysterious creature, and quite understandably concerned for the safety of his family. And then there was the matter of Claire's frightening dream last night to consider, he thought . . . But at the moment, he had no set idea about what he should do.

He stood up slowly, pondering the significance of his perplexing discovery, and only half-heartedly finished his inspection of the house's exterior for damage from the storm. Satisfied that only minor repairs were necessary, he glanced once again at the ominous-looking tracks scarring his backyard and resembling rambling, tattoo-like etchings, before finally entering the house and joining his wife and son in the kitchen.

"Claire," he said, "I want you and Timmy to stay close to the house for a few days. Now, I don't want you to get excited, but I found some animal tracks out back. Ssh, let me finish," he maintained as she tried to interrupt him. "They lead up to the

house and back out to the woods. It might be a bear . . . but I'm not sure. So, for the time being, let's play it safe and be careful."

"Oh, Steve," she blurted out anxiously. "My dream, remember . . ."

"Hon," he interjected. "You had a nightmare. That's all." He paused, sighing. "Relax. Trust me," he implored, gently taking her hand in his. After a few seconds, she smiled.

"You're right," she agreed, then looked at her son.

"Timmy," she said firmly. "You heard your father. I don't want you playing in the woods. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," he replied disappointedly. "I understand."

"Okay."

"Good," Stephen added. "I'm going to head into town for some more ammunition . . . just in case. So remember what I said."

During the drive he had time to mull over recent events.

They had moved into their country home a few months ago and had worked feverishly sprucing the place up: laying carpet, painting the bedrooms, and wallpapering the downstairs, among other tasks. After winter his main chore would be to install siding on the house, and he both looked forward to it and dreaded the thought at the same time.

He and his family were adjusting well to country living, but now there was the problem of the animal tracks which only compounded Claire's disturbing nightmare of the night before. She had bolted upright in bed, shaking and perspiring, babbling hysterically about some dark, fearsome creature that was attempting to break into the house. It had taken a few minutes to calm her down, but then the uncovering of the odd-looking tracks in the snow later this morning had just made matters worse. Of course he wasn't unfamiliar with wildlife, having grown up in the country, but that had been quite a while back. And what the hell kind of animal could make tracks like that, he wondered. Then, pulling himself from his weary musing, he turned his attention back to the road and continued on into town.

Later that evening, before he joined Claire in bed, he stared out of the bed-

room window at the cloudy, overcast night; the increasing snow flurries; and the black, tenebrous edge of the forest, looking like the gaping maw of some gigantic, primeval beast. As a child, he had never been afraid of the woods or of living in the country; he had always possessed a healthy attitude toward animals and nature. But right now he wasn't so sure. That thought alone frightened him, even more than the actual threat of some unknown wild animal roaming around his grounds. And as he peered outside, a sudden chill jolted him upright, and at that moment, he felt more afraid than he had ever been in his life. Shuddering, he slipped quietly into bed beside his wife's warm, sleeping body and silently prayed that no harm would befall him or any of his family.

Claire had the nightmare again.

After finally comforting her, Stephen ventured hesitantly to the window like a timid little boy, hoping that no new tracks would be visible. He was wrong. Surveying the ground, he clearly observed fresh tracks trailing from the woods to the house and back again, alongside the original set — which were now obscured by the previous night's light snowfall — like its evil twin. What the hell, he thought. His wife was having terrifying dreams about some hideous creature stalking them and, for the second night in a row, an unidentified animal had tromped through his yard right up to his house. What the hell, he thought. What was he going to do?

Shortly, he had his answer.

After breakfast, he decided to drive back into town and have a chat with Ray, the owner of the sporting goods shop where he had purchased the 12-gauge shotgun shells the day before. He told Ray that the animal had returned, and asked him for suggestions as to how he could rid himself of the problem and, glibly added, finally get a good night's sleep.

"Well, Steve," Ray began, leaning on the counter. "I still don't think you've got anything to worry about. I mean," he chuckled, "the bear . . . animal . . . whatever . . . hasn't tried to break into your house, has it?"

"No," Steve replied.

"And you do have a weapon . . . a shotgun, is it? . . . to use against this animal."

"Yes," he answered, starting to feel like he was being given the brush-off.

"Well," Ray continued with a shrug of his shoulders, "about the only thing I might do to ease *my* mind is wait up all night to see when this . . . animal . . . appears, and maybe follow it back to the woods and take a shot at him. Yep," he concluded, leaning back. "That's what I would do. But," he began again, after a brief pause, "I'll bet you don't see this, uh, bear . . . again, though. He was probably just restless and hungry, looking for a last bite of food before going into hibernation for the winter. Since he didn't find anything around your place, I doubt he'll come back again. Yep," he said, proud of his logic. "I don't think he'll be a problem any longer. You wait and see."

"I hope not," Steve stated, winching at the tone of skepticism in his voice. "Thanks for your help," he added quickly with a modicum of conviction, and hastily left the store.

On the ride home, he berated himself for not mentioning the reality of his wife's tormenting nightmares, as if he believed Ray would have been able to find a connection somewhere, or possibly a solution. But he realized immediately that Ray's laid-back, down-to-earth outlook on life would have precluded him from understanding the actual depth of Steve's fear — contrarily, he would have thought Steve was crazy.

The day flitted by surprisingly fast, as if the passage of time had been stepped up two-fold to hinder him, and just prior to dinner Steve remembered he had not inspected the house after last night's storm. It was too late now, and just as well that he do nothing until morning since another snowstorm was expected to hit them later this evening. Forecasters, beleaguered by local residents irate over the past few days of miserable weather, happily predicted a change for the better by morning when clear skies would prevail. In his mind, Steve went over the damage thus far — several wall planks loosened or broken, a few shingles blown away, a small hole in the attic, no bigger than a foot in diameter, that the gusting wind must have punched in, and two shutters damaged — and appreciated that all of it could wait another day. He sighed, however, because he knew there was no way he would get any rest tonight; he would be up, wait-

ing for the nocturnal prowler.

After kissing Claire goodnight and waiting for her to slide under the bed-covers, he smiled and stepped into the hall. He tiptoed gingerly upstairs to Timmy's room — one half of the attic, the completed, insulated side; the other half was unfinished and was used for storage — and pecked in on his eight-year old son. Timmy had churned and twisted the sheets around himself until he looked more like a shrouded cocoon — its inchoate inhabitant struggling to push its head free of the binding wrapping — than his beautiful, young son. He softly backed out of the room and crept downstairs to their bedroom.

Steve positioned himself on a comfortable chair by the window, checked the time, glanced at his sleeping wife, the shotgun next to the bed, and began his long vigil.

An hour or so later, somnolently squinting through the lazily falling snow, he noticed that a small section of the nearby forest appeared to be glowing and was considerably brighter than the rest. And as he watched dully, the lighted portion slowly became brighter, much brighter, and expanded wildly to encompass a vast area of the once-dark woods.

Fire! He thought frantically, instinctively, rudely jarred from his lethargic state.

Yet he saw no blaze, no flames; so he curbed the primitive urge to flee to safety with his family, and forced himself to observe what could only be some macabre unfolding.

The intense brightness gleamed swiftly, majestically, the flame-like shimmering suggestive of the inferno Dantè had once written of. (Why had he thought that?) Then it waned. As the glow diminished, individual "hot spots" suddenly became discernible, and he whimsically imagined that they were burning torches, and, for the first time, he speculated that he might be witnessing a religious ceremony of some kind . . . no, he corrected himself, carefully re-evaluating his thoughts, more like an *unholy* ceremony — an ancient, pagan ritual; a conclave of devil-worshippers heralding the arrival of a new leader or the onset of a momentous time. (What was wrong with him?) This isn't real, he told himself. It's not real!

Abruptly, it was over.

Sweating profusely, Stephen gaped at the woods half-afraid that he would find a vestige of the mesmerizing event he had just beheld. But there was nothing. Never had been. It had all been a dream, he realized. Just a half-waking dream.

He pecked back at the bed, glad that Claire was still asleep and had not been a spectator to his hysterics. And though he vowed to remain awake for the rest of the night, against his better efforts, he nodded off within minutes.

He woke much later to the sound of Claire's unrestrained whimpering.

"What?" he cried out, scrambling to her side, upset that he had fallen asleep once more.

"Oh, Steve," she sobbed. "It happened again . . . it was awful."

"Calm down, hon," he beseeched, holding her tenderly. "Everything's all right now." Then, angrily, he stormed over to the bedroom window and stared out into the early morning light at his snow-covered backyard. Amazingly, a third set of tracks lay mirror-like beside the others and, as he followed its path to the woods, his heart leaped into his throat. A huge section of the forest was charred and scorched, tree branches denuded, as if the entire area had been set ablaze overnight. As he gawked in stunned disbelief, his wife continued to mutter in the background.

"Its eyes, Steve . . . they were red . . . blood-red . . . devil's eyes . . ."

"Huh?" he said, frustrated, wrapped in thought.

And as she spoke, from outside (above?) came a muffled thud, almost as if a large clod of ice or snow had dislodged itself from the roof and plummeted to the ground. Almost . . .

" . . . but this time it was different," she went on shakily. "I thought it was trying to break into the house all along . . . Oh, god, Steve," she cried, " . . . it never returned to the forest! It returned to *our* house! . . . *Our* house was its lair!"

"Wha . . ." he mumbled, staring dumbfoundedly at his wife's tear-eyed, pained expression. Then the realization of what she had stated registered in his mind — the tracks leading to the house — the hole in the attic — last night's dream of the fire in the forest that was no dream —

"Oh, no!" he wailed in anguish, looking up at the ceiling in horror.

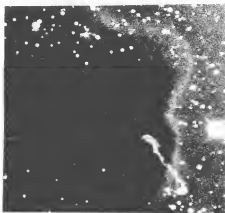
And as he reached for the shotgun, from the attic he heard Timmy's painful cry followed by the roar of the beast . . .

And the Darkness in my Eyes

By Shawn Ramsey

Dim, wan light shines down on me at sunset, the color dirty yellow, like silent movies, but in its nightly charade it masquerades as white, dulling angles of the walls. Outside, the sky is a luminous blue, like the eye of the fire at the core of the earth. I sit upon my velvet-spread bier after the time I wake, and find my vision blurry, as if the surface of my eyes were burned away by acid; and all the more by the flickering bulb; and glowering in my commonplace way, my eyes become unsounded abysses of shadow that hate, and turns my face into a perfect, ivory skull: the eternal distillation and immemorial emblem for death and hatred.

It means something else, as well, I know . . . but all I truly know is draped in fog by my own insatiable hunger.



Visions From Hell

By Steven K. Mitchell

In the corner
sitting on my bed
I feel the thread
which binds me to this reality

Become taut

Soon this world
will be far behind
vaguely remembered
in my mind

The thread snaps

And on my lap
is a mucous green cat
with the face of a rat

As in a dream
I throw the horror away
but what next greets my eyes
shall remain with me until my dying day

Over there
a tittering rat
perched on a human head

Here beside me
a monstrous dwarf
fondling himself

Smells assail me now

First the stench of brimstone
now decaying animals
fish I think

Much as I smelled along the shore
before I was banished forevermore
to this shadowy world of evil

What is this world I have fallen into?

Surely that child with dull grey eyes
cannot mean to pierce me with that
dripping lance

I think it best not to take that chance

This corridor
with its toxic smell
and greenish light
is the way to direct my flight

These carved figures down this hall
what sordid sights
figures of the night
so lifelike

A young girl decapitated

Here an old man has defecated
and eats it with a spoon

I remember my room

But that was long ago
far away

I must be insane

As the sickening visions rain
I feel no fear

Can it be that in hell
all feeling is lost?

Then what purpose?

Here the corridor divides

I must make up my mind
which path is best?

What a strange thought
which path is best in hell?

Oh well, let's take the left

A short way down the hall
I see crimson stairs

Looking up at them
I meet the stare
of a pair
of lambent green eyes

The light is uncertain
yet I glimpse thighs

Naked and female

A delicate musky smell
fills my nostrils
much as I smell
when I visit the brothels

Of my nebulous memory life

Perhaps she knows why I'm here

Up the stairs I step
one by one
'til at the top
I see a huge cave

The light is more shadowy than before

Steven K. Mitchell

it first shows less and then shows more
so I know not what is in store
as I silently enter the cave

Eyes red and staring
burn holes in me
the occasional bodies
that I see

Are mottled, missapen, deformed

Still, I feel no dread
as if my spirit itself were wed

To the darkness and evil

Suddenly the green eyes flicker
and there she rests
in a wicker chair

Long black hair
caresses her shoulders

And through a scintillant cream robe
her body shows

Full, and alluring

For the first time
I feel passion!

Consumed by lust
and not by rationale

I boldly approach the girl

The musky scent fills the air

She rises from the wicker chair
arms beckoning

Her smile is viciously evil
and full lips cannot conceal

Razor sharp incisors

Do I dare venture closer?

Does the moth flee from the flame?

I am filled with shame
yet I cannot resist

So consumed with lust am I
before I desist

I would rather die

Something I may have already done

We fall together as one

As full lips
envelop mine

Marble hands search
and find my scepter

I am no spectre

For these feelings of pleasure
are no delusion

On this glossed stone floor
we reach the conclusion

While the gibbering creatures
come as close as they dare

And burn my back
with their stares

She whispers seductively
for the first time

And her words come out
as a rhyme

*Now you taste
the forbidden fruit
you stab me
with your hateful spear*

*And evil has
its first root
as my master seeks
to draw you near*

*If one more time
our bodies entwine
before you can find
the thread*

*When you awaken
you shall be mine
and become his
when you are dead*

For a fateful memory returns

And though my lust burns
brightly
I know I must strive
mightily

To find the thread
which snapped
as I sat
upon my bed

I run back down the crimson stairs

Hearing evil laughter
I do not dare
to look back
for an instant!

Now I'm in the long corridor
and though my lust calls for more
I realize my only hope
is to run on

While my mind can see

What my world
used to be

The end of the hall
is in sight

And there in the corner
to my right

Is the cat
with the face of a rat

My eyes strive
to pierce the uncertain light

For if I am to end my flight

I must find the thread

There!

Above the strange child that bears
the lance

That tiny sting

My only chance!

I run to it
and grab it
While the child seeks
To stab at my thigh!

I sit alone
upon my bed

In my hand
a silken thread

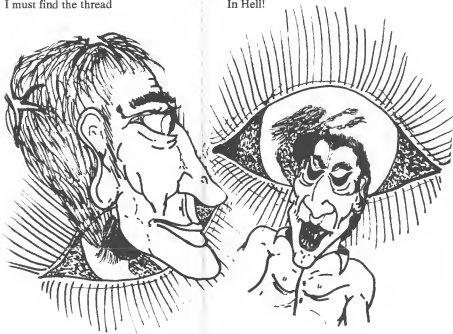
What a dream I just had
and I pray to God on high

I soon let out a fearful scream
for there upon my thigh

Is a bloody rip
as from the tip

Of a lance which resides

In Hell!



Cozen By John Powers

She lies upon me like a blanket, warm,
With a dream protection from the wind.
And from her hands there rains upon me blue,
Shades of sunshine, sparkled sin.

She squints and whispers dried compliments,
When at a closer listen it's not the same.
For in between those breaths of sun,
She is ever whispering her own name.

And when you awake from this sleep of skin,
There are blood-stained daggers smiling in her eyes.
And in her hands she holds a pulsing ball,
It is your own heart to your surprise.

She stole it when your body was steam,
And your eyes were melted in her hills.
She throws your heart before her feet —
It shatters and out, your love spills.

Uninvited Guest By Kim L. Neidigh

I found the opening in the back of the tomb
and followed the steps to the caverns below,
a bluish phosphorescence lighting my way.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs,
A mass of putrescent flesh rose before me
and pointed to an opening beyond —

Through which I heard the ghouls at their revels.

A Little Bit of Perspective Comes to the Dream

By Joey Froelich

It's the cold hands
That bother me the most,
The cold hands lifting up
Like ghosts, the violent
Thousand running around
In little groups,
So many of them who are
Getting loose.
They're small, efficient
But they feel good.
I can do anything I want
In my own bathroom I scream
— with these gods of the nightmare
Extreme! But you were
Right to be scared
About the white apes being loose!

Go for the bodies," he said before laughter took over the small room and the girl left.

He leaned back in the chair and looked at the picture on his desk. The laughter continued to spread.

The laughter haunted the dark corners and spider webs. But it stopped quickly as the old man gasped as if it were his last breath. How long had it been? The white ape in the picture looked up at him. Coughing now, the old man took out his comb — and quickly pushed it through the grey greasy hair of his head.

The old man picked up the cracker with peanut butter on it — the cracker the girl had left on the desk. She had set it next to the picture. Possibly this was a hint.

How long had it been?

His blood-shot eyes now studied the cracker. The old man was thin. His delicate skin held an unusual tint — a tint that spoke of things that weren't healthy: the color of death.

"You have to eat something," she had said. The girl was his daughter and was actually quite beautiful with wonderful long blonde hair. She had put the cracker there on the desk — put it right there in front of the old man.

Was that JIFFY peanut butter on it? There was a loud sound in the back of the room.

Could that be another rocking chair being thrown against the far wall? Shit — the old man thought. That will have been the third rocking chair in less than a week.

He put the cracker in his mouth.

And nearly choked to death!

He looked around the room that began to spin. The cracker stuck in his throat — the peanut butter was like glue. The grey face became blue. The old man shook his head as the greasy thin hair flew downward and the body started to convulse; a violent fit to be sure. And that's when the face changed.

Turned.

And his eyes worked. The grey hair turned white and thickened — all white and not grey . . .

. . . white as the moon.

How long had it been?

He felt the strange power take over his arms and legs. Power to spare. A great amount of power. Oh, yea. And suddenly the old man felt fine once again. He opened

the drawer of the desk. But instead of returning the comb to the drawer, he broke it in half. He breathed deeply and felt that distinctive hunger along his ribs, beneath them where a stomach grumbled because it hadn't had any food in such a long time. Three weeks without food — without even a morsel . . . much too long . . . but soon his daughter would surely return . . . from the zoo!

It seemed impossible. Maybe he had read *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* one too many times. And yet the "change" had kept him alive. He'd have been dead long before if it had not been for that white ape.

Hunger tore now as he waited for the girl.

A little peanut butter on a cracker is all it took. There was no longer any sound in the back room.

And his thoughts were filled with primitive nightmares and confused savagery — the eyes a dark hue. Enough power existed to lift the chair with one arm, the desk with two. *Three weeks without food.* And he could still do this. The cough had disappeared as if it had never existed. And the heart pumped blood with an obvious and most vigorous tick — like fine clockwork. Not as the one before that needed repair. The one that sometimes missed a beat, possibly even two.

He got up from the chair. And began to pace back and forth in the room. What was taking his daughter so long? Never had it taken her so long to return before. Yet even in this state he could be patient. Besides, his daughter had taken the key to the locked door. And the windows owned bars. A slant of light filtered across the floor. But that was all. Maybe it was night. And came from the moon.

. . . the hair . . . lots of hair . . .

. . . white, all white.

. . . oh, yea, as white as the moon.

It had gotten to the point where he didn't have anything to lose. He knew better than eating that food. But the alternative was even worse. He had often thought of the worms.

And he did wait — always did for as long as he could.

Now the old man heard the key turn in that lock of the door.

That would be his daughter.

Yea!

His beautiful daughter with the wonder-

ful long blonde hair . . . that lifted like wings in the air. The girl opened the door and threw something into the room.

The meat was raw, blood-red.

It had come from the zoo.

It seemed as if no one had told him.

(You see it had always been in his brain,

a mere fantasy). Still the girl had closed the door swiftly. She still didn't have the heart to tell her father the truth. *It would kill him.*

But apes ate fruit.

And not raw meat!

Rats of the Sack

— a fast food meal in two-part harmony

By Joey Froelich

I couldn't have
Read my poetry
And continued
To chew on
Its head.
The gummi rats
Looked kinda dead.
And the audience
Laughed —
When I threw
Some of those rats
At them!
See — there were
Plenty in that
Fast food sack
I had brought
With me!

Part II

God — it was disgusting.
God — it was disgusting!
But it made the audience
Roar.
The rat in my mouth
Looked at them
Between the teeth
That were turning black
As I chewed on its skull!



SNOWLIGHT

By Jeffrey Osier

My father was dead. Freshly dead. My family was reeling with an unpalatable and unpredictable mixture of shock, grief and resentment. More and more I tried to keep away from them, just as more and more of them kept piling off planes and trains and I began to realize just what a big, monstrous thing my family really was. Relatives who remembered me only as a baby — if at all — were suddenly scrutinizing me, correcting and directing me, reproaching me and just measuring me all the way around, wondering how this scrawny, sullen twelve-year-old was going to be anything but a hindrance to his poor, grief-stricken mother.

Beyond that, my father's death was something that officially had very little to do with me. It was talked about all the time in my presence, but I never entered into these talks. His death, my mother's difficult situation, even the problem of . . . me; it was as though they were speaking a language I wasn't supposed to understand.

And so no one noticed the death, the malevolent cavity opening in my mind. No one except my mother, who in several instances seemed to recognize it in the threatening emptiness in my eyes, but never did anything about it. Didn't talk about it, didn't even talk around it. She refused to acknowledge it.

Within two weeks of my father's death, a dozen blackheads erupted on my face. I got my first grey hair, and had one of my molars shattered in a schoolyard fight. I could feel the ugly momentum within me, saw nothing to hinder me, no one to even attempt to convince me to do otherwise, no one to even notice it happening, and so decided to go with that momentum.

It was 1967, the winter of the big snow that paralyzed all of Chicagoland and turned the children's world into a vast, alien wasteland, full of unrevealed treasures and snowdrifts up to our hips. My friends and I basked in the pain and glory of the big snow. We shoplifted from the barren shops in the mall, skitched, pelted houses, cars and helpless adults with snowballs.

On January 25th, we scaled the driftslopes at the edge of the shopping mall parking lot, up onto a deserted, drift-covered Eisenhower Expressway, where we waved our arms in defiance, smoked Marlboros with their filters broken off, talking about

what we'd do if we caught a car struggling through the drifts.

My own suggestion was to torture and kill the occupants, cook them in the blaze of their ignited automobile, eat them, make jewelry and weapons from their bones, and use the wreckage as a barricade for our next victims. I was just kidding. It was the kind of thing a kid like me, with my reading habits, would consider a joke.

But my friends, obsessed with prick and cunt jokes, reveling in the fantasies of streetfighting, sex, and vandalism, were appalled by my suggestion and let me know it in no uncertain terms.

Normally, I'd have been considered far too weird to be a part of that gang, though I had been moving along its fringes for the last year or so. But lately my stock seemed to have risen considerably.

Because of the disease. I was morbid, ferocious, I hated almost everybody, and my whole bell-jarred childhood of comic books and science-fiction films had just crumbled around me, leaving something nervous and desperate and doomed to explode at any moment. They let me tag along because they wanted to be there when I finally went off. They kicked me around, and yet . . . somehow, just as my mother was, they were afraid of me. They knew that sooner or later, I'd do something.

As I surely would have, sooner or later.

That weekend, three of us had been hauled in for skitching on the back of an unmarked police car. I was supposed to be grounded for the next three weeks. On Tuesday night I found out that my brother and sister and their families, plus a few of my least favorite aunts and uncles were all coming over for the evening. I balked. I went all hysterical and stormed out of the house. There was no way I was going to spend an entire evening listening to them lecture me on the importance of not mumbling and above all having good eye-contact when I talked to people.

So I hooked up with Bob Ritchie and Jimmy Bugella over on the corner by Jimmy's house. They were going to sit and smoke cigarettes in an unoccupied house Jimmy's brother had just recently broken into. I was far too jittery for that and said so, suggesting that we go up on the ridge over O'Neill Road and pulverize passing

cars with snowballs.

"Ah, sure, Pickett, of course that's what you would say. Man, we been snowballing cars since the second grade and we're pretty fucking sick of it. Besides, you can get in more trouble breaking into a house than you can just throwing snowballs at cars."

"My brother says the place is really safe, man, come on."

So I was pushed and badgered into going to the abandoned house. It was fairly remote and it was surrounded by trees. From the outside it looked perfectly normal. In the months to follow, the interior and finally the exterior would be trashed, and a week before the end of school, it would be burnt to the ground. But for now, the only strange aspect to it was the yelling and crashing coming from inside.

We saw Larry Lorazo out front. He told us that Jimmy's brother was in there with two of his friends, and they were shouting it out with two big greasers from the Cozy Club. He told us it wouldn't be too cool to go in there and Bob and Jimmy agreed. We stood around, listening to the five of them screaming at each other and smoked Chesterfields from a pack Larry stole from his ma.

"Let's snowball cars," I muttered under my breath, just satisfying my urge to annoy them.

"Yeah, man," Larry beamed, "let's do it. I'd love to nail my fuckin' stepfather's car with iceballs, drive the son of a bitch off the road and — BAM! Into a fuckin' tree. Let's do it!"

Bob and Jimmy grunted and mumbled, looked back at the house but made no move one way or another. We just smoked and listened to the escalating noise inside.

"Those Cozys sound really pissed off. Shouldn't we do something?"

"What? Call the cops?"

"Naaa. Hey, I'm just thinking about your brother."

"Fuck my brother! I hope they shoot the jagoff!"

They all laughed.

"Let's snowball cars!"

There was a unanimous cry as we trudged off into the snow. Every step was an effort as we cut through yards, pulling our legs out of drifts one after another, never knowing when we'd sink in up to our waists in some inconspicuous snow trap.

I just tagged along behind them, silently listening to every stupid remark they made, smoking twice as many cigarettes as any of

them, and thinking about all my relatives in my living room, every one of them bad mouthing me, and her just listening and nodding, and I wondered, was she thinking of me now? Did she wonder, imagine, where I might be?

I realized, as I did over and over, every night, that this was all I had to live for. I coughed up a gob and flicked my cigarette into the snow. You look at the emptiness, the madness, at the circumstances which are inevitable in your life, and it frightens and sickens you, watching it all from the outside like that. And then one day you realize that it doesn't bother you the way it once did and that it is no longer the inevitable, the dreaded. It is something that has manifested itself into the routine. I felt I had no one in any sense that I was accustomed to, and suddenly found myself all the stronger for it. That emptiness refueled me, and I refilled the emptiness with my rage, and thus filled, found for myself a nice, quiet equilibrium. I could die now, I thought. I could die and just . . . not be anymore, not in any sense that would do my thinking part any good to look forward to . . . and not fret about it, not cry or worry about it. There was nothing but the edge — whatever edge I could grope up to, and then, the easy business of being dead, afterwards.

Charlie Frantantian, a kid we all hated because his older brother Rick had beat up Bob's sister and raped her — back when we were in kindergarten — lived in a house with a side yard that edged right out to a peak that stood about ten feet over O'Neill Road. There was a nice, expansive tree there, with roots that lay exposed by erosion along the edge of the road. It was a perfect place to set up our firing nest, with good visibility and plenty of cover. It was far enough from the Frantantian house that we could smoke and yell all we wanted without getting the cops called on us. As for Charlie Frantantian, he was the toughest kid in the seventh grade, as well as the oldest, but he didn't have that many friends, and the four of us as a group — especially with Jimmy Bugella, who was possibly the third or fourth toughest kid in the seventh grade — were more than a match for him.

"Just let him come out here to see who it is," Jimmy beamed.

It was soon apparent why Bob and Jimmy seemed so weary of nailing cars like this. This was possibly the world's best vintage point for this kind of game, and the two

of them had been using it for years. It was just too easy — too easy to get a good shot, too easy to get away if someone had the urge to come and get us. It was a busy, one-way street without another side street to turn on for almost a quarter of a mile.

And the truth was that there was just too much snow. Too many drifts, and too many new snowfalls. People trudged through snow, drove through it, and lately, they were even growing immune to being pelted with it as they drove.

So it came a matter of temperament. Larry Lorazo could easily imagine that every car was his stepfather's, and get fresh satisfaction out of every projectile thumping against the hood or exploding across the windshield. And I could pretend it was . . . who? My hatred was too congested and all too much a *thing*, an obstruction in itself. It was every snowball I threw, just as it was every car I hit and to even a more extreme degree, it was every car I missed.

But Bob Ritchie and Jimmy Bugella were already red hoods, with tough brothers in high school who were real greasers. Throwing snowballs at cars was just too petty and childish a way of causing trouble, not when you could bust up a kid, bust his parents' windows, spray paint their . . . well, anything, steal stuff bigger than what you could just slip easily into your pockets, cop feels from girls in your class and persist until one day, one of them spread her legs for you . . .

In the vast scheme of things, snowballing cars was just short of nothing.

The one highlight was a station wagon with ten little kids and two grandparent types in the front seat. The four of us must have hit it a dozen times. The guy tried slamming on his brakes, but began to spin out, and had to keep going.

I let loose my last snowball.

"Aw, man, see the way I nailed his license plate?"

"Ah, Pickett, you palsy! I hit that fucking plate!"

Larry Lorazo was about my height, about ten pounds heavier than me; a kid who'd given me a lot of grief back in the third, fourth grades. We both remembered that, even though we tolerated each other reasonably well because we hung out mostly with the same guys. But Larry liked to make half-hearted attempts to remind me and assert his place above me in the pecking order. This was just one more example. He'd let loose his last snowball before the station

wagon had begun to spin, and we all knew it.

It wasn't a matter of pride. It wasn't even me retargeting my rage. I don't know why I hit him. It stunned everyone so much that I managed to hit him twice more, a second time, in the nose and then in the ribcage, before anyone said or did a thing. Larry punched me and elbowed me in the face before I got him again, kneeling him in the face, throwing him down and sitting on his chest, feeding him snow.

I was pulled off and thrown to the ground as the two of them picked up Larry and tried to calm him as they walked away. As they neared the curb, I could hear him screaming how he'd kill the fucker, with Bob and Jimmy talking away, too quiet for me to hear. Whatever they were saying to him was calming him down. The three of them continued to talk for a while, and I began to hear sobbing. And then, Larry's broken voice rising again, "I'll kill the fucker!" I stepped away from the tree, trying to catch their words without letting them see me, and suddenly realizing that I wasn't the fucker. Not at all. It was his stepfather. And I could hear the consoling tones in their voices as they talked to him, and I remembered those days after my dad died, and the stern, protective air they had towards me.

When they came back, it was just the two of them.

"Way to go, Pickett. Beating up one of your own, for no reason."

"Hey, what do you mean? You heard what he called me? I hit that license plate . . . I . . ."

"So what? Jesus, you are a fuckin' palsy! So you pick someone you know you can take, and you beat him up just 'cause he called you a fuckin' name. You asshole. You been acting like a jerk ever since your old man died!"

"Asshole. Larry's old man beat him up tonight. And then he gets punched out by a scrawny shit like you!"

"We've known Larry since the second grade, man. Who the hell were you back then? What makes you think we want you with us here? Huh?"

They took my cigarettes, smoked a little and decided to nail a few cars. I just sat there, about ten feet from them, listening as they got into the rhythm and punctuation of the activity. They stopped talking about me, about Larry and his old man, and just talked about the kinds of cars they were hitting. I was amazed at how much they

could find to say about each one, at how clever their remarks seemed. I had grown up one of the good kids, the smart kids, and yet, in every sense that seemed to count anymore, these two proto-greasers seemed to outclass me. Nothing I was or had ever wanted to be stood for anything anymore.

I didn't dare walk over and join them. I was rooted to the spot, paralyzed by my own shame. I felt like I was going to cry. Larry had cried, but that was different. He probably already felt stupid for having cried in front of Bob and Jimmy, and there was no way I was going to let that happen to me, not over something as meager and unjustifiable as my own shame. After all, I was the guy who had yet to cry even once about my own dad, after almost a whole month.

I wondered if anyone had brought that up back at my house.

"Hey, Pickett, you're missing all the theatre traffic, man!"

I sulked over to them, Jimmy turned and smiled his toothy, threatening grin, as though nothing had happened. He tossed a snowball at me. I caught it, knelted down against the drift, watching the rows of headlights rolling towards us.

The people were fairly unresponsive. The toughest any of them got was when they honked at us. As the traffic thickened it slowed down and we had to be more and more careful about revealing ourselves to the people in the lane closest to us. Bob and Jimmy got into an argument over what were the best songs on the radio during the school year so far. Bob held out for *96 Tears* by Question Mark and the Mysterians, *You Can't Hurry Love* by the Supremes, and *Psychotic Reaction* by the Count Five.

"Oh, yeah? What about *Ruby Tuesday*? What about *Eleanor Rigby*? *Dent With the Blue Dress On*? Come on, Pickett, help me out here."

I wondered if I had a voice left. "All the good songs came out last summer," I grumbled. "There won't be as many good songs all school year as there were last summer. Think about it. *Hanky Panky*, *Summer in the City*, *Along Comes Mary*, *Paint it Black*, *Wouldn't it be Nice* . . ."

"*They're Coming to Take Me Away!*"

"*Lady Jane!*"

"*Good Lovin'!*"

"Naa, that came out last spring. How about *Hey Joe*?"

"*Hey Little Girl!*"

"*Wild Thing!*"

"*DIRTY WATER!*"

"Shit, you're right. Last summer was the best. It ain't ever gonna be that good again. Not now. Not with the Monkees, it ain't."

"Yeah, now we get *Winchester Cathedral*. *Snoopy* and the *Red Baron*."

"*Mellow Yellow*."

"*The Eggplant that Ate Chicago*."

"*Aw, hey, man. I like that song!*"

"*Hey, hey . . . oh, shit. Look at this!*" Jimmy pointed down the road. I looked, and a chill ran through me, an unaccountable revelation as I first set eyes on those headlights, wider apart than any others on the road, moving as though in slow motion, silently and completely isolated from all the other cars.

"Jesus Christ! It's a fucking Packard!"

"*Ahh, you don't know shit about cars, Ritchie, ya jagoff!*"

I let loose a snowball.

"I don't care what it is. Let's get it!"

We must have hit it ten times before we heard the sound. It had just passed us. It wasn't as though it slammed on its brakes. On this afternoon's fresh slush, those bald tires would have sent that hulk of metal sailing, even at the slow speed it was moving. It just suddenly . . . stopped dead, a jolting stop that was coupled with a sound like a deep, monstrous hiss.

And then, it began to back up, sending traffic skidding and honking. It was backing up towards this street.

"Holy shit! This guy's pissed off!"

By the time we were out from beneath the tree, the car was turning the corner.

"*Rip!*"

We cut a diagonal across the Frantantians' back yard and across the next two yards before we cut over to the street. There was no sign of him. We ran for half a block and only stopped then because of Jimmy's outstretched arms.

"*Okay. We're all right.*"

"*Man, that guy was mad!*"

We started to laugh it off.

"*What the hell was that thing?*" I asked.

"*It didn't look like a Cadillac.*"

"*No way. You know, I think it was a Checker Marathon.*"

"*Whaaa?*"

"*You know, a cab, but not painted like a cab.*"

"*Naaa, it was too big for that.*" Bob spit.

"*I still say it was a Packard.*"

"*Did you hear that hissing when it stopped? Like it had air brakes.*"

"*Aw, great. Now it's a fucking truck.*"

Suddenly, there was an explosive scream behind us. We were drowned in a field of yellow light.

We swung around to see the car, which seemed impossibly huge, bearing down on us. Beams from its twin spotlights slashed at us.

"Split up!" Jimmy cried as he jumped one way, while Bob and I jumped the other way. I slid and fell into the street.

The tire that skidded to a halt only two feet from my head was enormous. For an instant I caught my clear but distorted reflection in the hubcap. In the next instant the door was opening and I was on my feet and running up the front lawn of the nearest house. I caught a glimpse of Bob disappearing between two houses on my right.

I slipped into the shadows along the side of the house. The car door was shut and the car was just idling. I couldn't see a sign of anybody, in or outside of the car. I backed into a metal garbage can, lost my balance, slipped on the ice and fell to the ground, catching my forehead on the twisted metal handle.

I touched the cut near my temple as I stumbled to my knees and crawled behind the row of three trash cans. I huddled there, listening, running my blood between my ungloved fingertips.

Time seemed to freeze for me. It seemed that a lifetime passed through me in a single breath. I wondered if I would ever be able to move again.

The spell was broken by the sound of one of the trash cans being kicked against the brick wall and then sent flying across the snowdrifts at the house next door.

I was on my feet. At twelve and a half I must have been all of one inch over five feet tall, so I may have been wrong, but in those first instants, facing him for the first time, he seemed to be at least seven and a half feet tall. I could see only his silhouette now but could already feel the monstrous presence in that black-shadowed face. He lifted the second trash can off the ground.

It wasn't until he held the can high over his head, with paper bags tumbling onto the ice, that I realized what he intended to do.

The sound of that can against the ice was a sickening thud. I wasn't far enough from it to see him not be shaken by its implications. I heard the other can crash and turned back to see impact, with his quick but bent and clumsy gait, following me across the yard. I leaped over the fence and landed on hands and knees in the alley. My ungloved right hand

slapped down hard, impacting all the way to the gravel.

By the time I was on my feet he was at the fence. As I ran I heard the sound of the fence shatter beneath his fury.

I ran past three houses and then ducked through a backyard, over a fence and across the street. He was no more than twenty feet behind me the whole time.

And I was moving in the wrong direction. I was now two blocks east of the street where we'd split up, and I was moving farther from my house, from Jimmy's and Bob's houses, towards the fringes of town.

From here on, the houses were farther and farther apart. Sooner or later they would give way to the quarry and industrial park.

But he was moving too fast and covering too much ground with every step for me to double back. It was almost as though he was funneling me in the direction of his own choice.

I tried to cut around the corners every chance I got. Once I managed to get myself turned towards the west as I rounded a garage, but found him standing there, blocking my path. A glint of light hit the face, or that mass of tissue where the face should have been.

A staccato pattern whistled through one of the orifices at the front of his head.

I opened my mouth to scream but only a hoarse gasp came out. I stepped back once, twice, and he didn't move. I took off running, sprinting as fast as I could in my constrictive winter wear, out into the drift-white wasteland separating the houses here on the edge of town. Half of my steps deposited me in the snow up to my hips.

The first time I looked back I could see his silhouette trudging after me, at what under any other circumstances would have seemed a safe distance — thirty or forty yards. The mere fact that I saw him at all only convinced me to run faster.

I didn't look back until I was among the trucks along the edge of the quarry, a good quarter of a mile past the last house. I couldn't see any movement and so for a moment I wondered if maybe I'd actually shaken him — lost him or tired him or just discouraged him. And then I thought of that . . . face, if face is what it was. His size. The way he'd brought that can down in a blow that had to have been intended to kill me. I looked around. Was all this a dream?

I felt a throbbing pain in my right palm. I took off my left glove and felt the wet

abrasion with my fingertips. I gently rubbed away the alley rubble and searched for that right glove. It was gone and I couldn't remember when I'd last had it on.

Somehow I had to find another route home. There was no way I could retrace my steps and so I had the choice of cutting north and moving parallel to the expressway, or continuing south as I seemed to be doing now, along the heavy machinery of the quarry area. I stood a better chance of finding my way back home if I followed the expressway, but I'd be back on O'Neill Road.

So I continued to move past the heavy digging machinery, most of which was hidden beneath sweeping, untrammeled drifts of snow. And as I did, and especially as I left the quarry; crossed a road and into the parking lot of the Pohl Company, I felt a chill gnawing at the real world.

It began to snow.

The flakes were big, and dropped quickly on this windless night. Within a few minutes the snowfall was so thick that I couldn't see where I was going. My only beacons were the lights that stood high over the landscape, softened by the haze of the snow. I became completely disoriented and began to wonder if it was worth it to keep walking at all.

So I sat for awhile and examined the abrasions on my palm. I grew hypnotized by the vast perspectives revealed in the illuminated falling snow, felt myself pulled away from the events that had marred my life all winter. I lay back in a snow drift, staring up at the sky, blinking all the snowflakes away and thinking about my dad.

I sat up with a start, wondering how long I'd been on the ground like this, unsure of whether I'd fallen asleep or not. I struggled to my feet. Every joint seemed to ache as I took those first few steps, but as I walked the pain slowly subsided. So I had to walk, had to keep moving. A layer of snow was dropping from my coat and pants as I staggered up to a snow-laced chain fence.

No longer knew where I was, what time it could possibly be, or whether I would ever find my way out of this wasteland.

Everything around me, especially the dark, gigantic shapes on the other side of the fence, seemed somehow unreal, as though, beneath the drifts and the freshly fallen snow, lay a world not as I had ever known it, but as the disease within me was recreating it. In fact, everything that had happened

to me since we'd first set eyes on that car seemed — not like a dream — but like the doom that pervaded my life and dreams, leaking out and warping the world to suit the madness and bitterness that tainted every aspect of my life.

"Pickett! Hey, Danny!" came a hoarse whisper on the other side of the fence. I saw a shape move out from behind one of the giant, snow-draped machines. "Is that you?"

It was Bob Ritchie. He looked from side to side and then ran up to the fence.

"Shit man, what're you doin' here?" "That guy followed me! Shit, Bob, I think the guy was trying to kill me."

"Followed you? But . . . have you seen him?"

"Not for awhile. What're you doin' out here?"

"Just climb the fence."

"Why don't you climb the fence?"

"Shut up and climb. Anyway, I got the fags."

He backed away, disappearing through a wall of falling snow. I made a slow, unsteady ascent up the twenty foot fence. As I reached the top, the entire fence wavered beneath my shaking, weakening arms. I leaned too hard against the sharp braids at the top, cut my face, and ripped my coat. I was afraid to go over the edge. I swallowed hard and looked about me at the transfigured night. I could see the vast space surrounding me, the open fields, the gaping sky, but the air was so thick with snow that I felt enclosed in a small room whose boundaries were a pulsing haze — easy to break through but impossible to escape. I could see no sign of Bob Ritchie.

I lost my balance and then my grip, and fell the twelve feet into the snow bank, my little room still firmly in place around me.

I was staggering now, feeling the frustration well up through me, that feeling that I could do nothing right. No — the feeling that misfortune not only seemed to follow me but actually radiated from me and infected the world around me. I killed my father, I perpetuated my mother's grief, created all these nasty-tempered drones who called themselves my relatives, and now, finally, in order to kill myself off, created a monster and a snow-smothered wasteland of twisted metal to bring about my death. The Big Snow of 1967 would be nothing more than all of my frozen tears, unable to come out any other way.

"What kind of place is this?" I heard the

haunted voice, and I thought I recognized it as my own.

"Ahh, this is just a bunch of old scrap from the Pohl Company. We trashed all this shit years ago."

Bob Ritchie stepped out from the shadows of a great machine, smoking a cigarette.

"Is he here?"

"I don't think so. Danny... why did you say he chased you out here? I mean, the guy was right behind me 'til about ten minutes ago."

"Well, there's two of 'em, because someone came out of that car after me... and he chased me all the way out here."

"Naah... there was only one person in that car. A big guy."

"Yeah, a real big guy. I saw his face, Bob! Jesus Christ! I saw the guy's face... and... I mean... he hasn't got a face at all!"

"Shit, man, don't get so worked up. He was just some guy. Some drunk, I'll bet. He was probably after both of us and we were so fuckin' scared we couldn't see each other the whole time. But we shook him. See? Here, have a rag."

I lit up. "I don't think so, Bob. Look."

Over a hundred yards away, beneath the snow-filtered glow of a light, a figure staggered, tall and broad, with arms that hung stiff and extended nearly to his knees.

"That's him."

"Yeah, you're right. But look, Pickett. See how he staggers? Just a big, fucking drunk. Some nasty assed old boozier, like old Singleton, or Larry's old man."

"He's coming this way."

"He'll never get us. Wait a second."

He began digging in the snow at the foot of the machine, finally pulling up a length of steel rod with a twisted, jagged tip.

"See, I told you we trashed these things ages ago. Here, you take this," he said, pushing it at me and then digging some more until he came up with another piece.

"Just in case the guy does catch us, we'll crack him open. Hell, we'll knock him out and take his money. How's that? You with me?"

I lowered my head. I wanted to believe Bob Ritchie, to trust his judgment. I needed to trust it. But Bob was wrong. On all counts. I couldn't feel his fear, but I knew it was there. It had to be.

"Check out the way he walks, Danny. The guy can barely stand. We can take him."

"The guy who chased me was moving fast!"

"All right! All right! Come on. I know a place we can go. We'll hide in the tunnels."

"Tunnels? No way!"

"Ahhh, come on!" He began walking and I followed. "They're big pipes that corrugated sheet metal stuff. They've been here for years. We used to play war in 'em all the time when we were kids."

As we walked on in silence I tried to imitate his air of self-assurance, tried to walk as though I was cool and cocky and enjoying myself, and all the while I was feeling sick inside, wondering just what Bob Ritchie was really thinking. Was he lying? Was he just trying to keep me from panicking? Or was he just a fool?

They were there just as he'd described them. Corrugated sheet metal pipes, anywhere from ten to thirty feet long and almost five feet in diameter. As we approached them, we passed concrete blocks from which bouquets of tall, twisted cable grew, spreading out into the night skies like electric trees, bent and dense like a forest canopy.

I could hear a distinct buzzing noise but never had the chance to pinpoint the source.

We ducked into one of the pipes, moved through it, stepped briefly back into the snow and then into another. We sat down smoking cigarettes. My throat was hurting pretty bad now and I had to suppress the nagging tickle in my throat.

I kept my eyes on the barely visible face of Bob Ritchie, trying to read him. I kept my ears to the sounds outside.

"Bob? What kind of car was that?"

"I don't know." His whisper was softer than mine as he spoke, occasionally spitting out a pinched speck of tobacco. "A Hudson Hornet, maybe. Shit, I bet your brother Skip would know."

I was coughing now, trying to catch and propel a worm of phlegm from my throat. It just wouldn't come, and I couldn't stop coughing, or keep the cough from getting louder.

Suddenly he clutched my forearm and let out a threatening hiss.

There was a sound nearby. At first I couldn't make it out, but as it passed us, I realized it was someone's hand brushing against the ripples of the metal. Accompanying it was a deep, troubled breathing, in synch with a thin, fluttering whistle. We began to back quietly in the other direction, our eyes on the circular opening at the end of the tunnel, and finally, on the silhouette of a man staggering against the snow light.

We let out gasps, pushed against each other for the lead, and ran.

Bob dashed through a maddening labyrinth of those tunnels, almost losing me on several tight turns. There was no way he was going to lose me now. When he stumbled and fell inside one of them, I fell right over him.

We sat up breathless, cursing and listening.

"This isn't right. Nothing about this is right. That guy, this place. It's all wrong. Don't you see it? Like I'm in a fucking dream."

"Shhh... don't cry on me, Pickett. Let's just... listen a minute."

The silence was so intense, so strained, and the cough trying to escape me so violent, I was afraid that by letting it out I'd shatter not only the silence but everything around me, leaving me only in black, borderless space.

"Okay," he whispered at last. "Let's go."

Suddenly, directly behind his head, was a thunderous blow, denting the metal inward. We barely had the chance to react when there came another one, in the same spot, tearing open the tunnel. A hand, an arm burst through so quickly that its fingers were wrapped around Bob's arm before we had time to run.

"Hit it! Hit it!" he screamed, his voice more horrified and desperate every instant, until the scream was a wordless cry of agony.

We both beat at that arm with our metal pipes, until it was only me beating it and then even I had to stop because the arm had receded and Bob, whose scream was dying into a whimpered gurgling, was pulled bloodily through the jagged, toothed tear of metal that was far too small for him.

I ran out of the tunnel and was confronted by another. I couldn't quite myself now, as I stumbled, slapping my arms against the metal shells, coughing and whimpering with complete abandon, knowing that there was no way I could lose him, making all this noise, and knowing that I would never find my way out of this cluster of giant pipes before he caught me. It was too late to hold myself back, too late to think, to control my panic. All the tears that had sat smoldering inside me for the last month came exploding out of my eyes, and my crying, far from silenced by my circumstances, grew louder and louder with every turn.

And then, he stood before me. It was as though he just appeared out of thin air, blocking my path, the pitifully small and

broken and unrecognizable body of my friend hanging limp in his hand, the snowlight illuminating the front of his head, the grotesque, twisting field of flesh where a face should have been, but wasn't.

And I stopped. The pipe hung loose at my side as I stood staring. Neither of us moved. His hand opened and Bob Ritchie's body fell into the snow as only a dead thing could. The front of the giant's head twisted and contorted. The flesh began to pop and peel away in a diagonal across his face and blunt, oversized teeth appeared, gleaming in the light. He laughed a familiar laugh.

And then I knew. Or I thought I knew.

"NO!" I screamed in disbelief and tried to bolt. I felt the hand at my shoulder, the hot, death-foul breath across the back of my neck. I turned with the pipe and caught him across the side of the head — a clean, unexpected and unblocked blow. I could feel the resonance of that connection all through my body.

He was leaning too far forward and the impact sent him sprawling. He fell sideways into the corrugated metal, his hands trying to break the fall. I hit him again, bringing the pipe straight down with both hands and all of my ninety-three pounds and felt the head give beneath it. He let out a cry as the giant hands came up flailing at me, at the split head — I don't know which.

I threw the pipe at him and ran.

My hands and body were wet with blood. My face was awash with tears and the snow that melted against my cheeks as I ran.

I found my way out of the maze of gigantic pipes and began running in the open fields of snow, no longer caring where I was or where I might end up.

I knew I hadn't stopped him. He wasn't human. He wasn't even alive. And though he was at least a foot and a half taller than my father, he had my father's laugh.

I had no idea where I was when I finally found myself running along the edges of backyards. I moved between two houses and out towards an unfamiliar street. I slipped in the fresh snow and fell flat on my face in the street as a car came skidding around the corner. It slammed on the brakes as I rolled away, looking up to see a '63 Bonneville full of greasers.

"Ah, ya stupid little son of a bitch!" one of them growled as they passed, leaning out the passenger window and hurling a beer can which caught me in the cheek.

And then they were gone. The check stung. I could smell the beer in my hands as I

clutched my face.

As I got up on the sidewalk I heard another car approaching the corner. It was garbage night on this block, for the street was lined with cans, so I ducked behind one and watched as a Corvair came to a stop almost directly in front of me. I thought I recognized the car as Mr. Hanner's, some guy who lived just down the block from me. I crept out and grabbed onto his back fence just as he pulled away from the stop sign.

It was an easy skitch, sliding along through the snow that lay fresh against the ice-impacted street. I sank my head between my arms, smelling the exhaust and watching the street pass beneath me.

When I finally let go of the fender I was only four blocks from my house. I brushed myself off and began the slow trudge home. I thought of Jimmy Bugella, safe at home all this time. How could he ever believe me? How could I explain Bob's death to him — or anyone? Could I even admit to having witnessed it? A boy, one of my best friends, suddenly transformed into a lifeless bag of collapsing, draining tissue, and discarded into a reddened snowdrift.

Suddenly, I was struck by yellow light, deafened by the screaming of tires. I stepped back, trying to focus on the gigantic metal hull that had just leaped in front of me. A door opened and slammed and a shape was slapped down on the hood.

And he was there, standing in front of me.

I backed away a few steps as my eyes adjusted to the light and I saw him clearly before me. The twisting pattern of teeth widened and parted into what seemed to be a hideous smile as the dry, staccato whistle emerged from him, a calm, peaceful sound that melted with the stillness of the moment but clashed with what I knew lay in store for me, and with that tortured array of features that in no way resembled a face.

I was too exhausted to run. I couldn't even move. I felt the gigantic palm atop my head, the fingertips like gouged files pressing against my temples. I dropped to my knees, curling up into the slush.

"Don't kill me," I sobbed, "please don't hurt me. I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean it . . . any of it. I don't wanna die, but I don't wanna be dead. Please, please . . . I'll make it up to you . . . Father."

He pulled the hand away. The whistling erupted into laughter. For the first few instants, I was sure that it was my father's

laugh, but as it continued, I realized that wasn't it at all, and the memory, the recognition it stirred in me was something deeper, more distant, of a dream being from the dimmest reaches of childhood, someone I had once identified with the dark side of my father, but was not human, not human at all . . .

He backed away. I heard a thump, and then went sprawling into the street slush as a body was hurled at me, a body which seemed to fall apart on impact. I screamed and struggled to get away, as its arms flailed powerfully against mine even as they seemed to detach from the body. When I got free and looked down at the body lying limp in the street, I recognized it immediately.

And so I was not surprised when I looked up and found the car had disappeared without a trace. Because Jimmy Bugella had cut off in the other direction. He would have been home before I'd even made it to the quarry. And yet it was his broken, mangled body at my feet.

I screamed, loud enough that anyone within a block's radius could have heard me through locked doors and storm windows. I was standing alone and bloodsoaked over the mangled remains of one of my best friends, and there was no way I could ever explain how it had happened. And so it occurred to me how this might look to cops, or to those people who would come out in response to my screams.

So I ran. Mom would understand. No . . . maybe she wouldn't, but she'd listen, and believe, and hold me, and I could cry at last and tell her all the things about dad that I was already beginning to miss but was losing the ability to remember and express. And then it would be over. She'd protect me, solace me, move me away somewhere where no one would think or suspect that any of this had anything to do with me. Because it didn't, couldn't have anything to do with me, and she'd believe that. Mother, you'll believe just this once that there really are monsters, won't you, and that they exist quite apart from whatever dark and diseased thoughts I may have and you may have noticed in my eyes . . .

And then I saw the cars. My sister and her family's car, my aunt Helen and uncle Frank's station wagon, my uncle Robert's car and my brother Skip's Austin Healey. All of them, together now. And I knew what was there behind that door. All those people, surrounding and obscuring my mom, their words and features stern and preoccupied

and uncomprehending. There was no place to go. And I knew that the bloody, bone-splintering reality soaking through me would not merely be unbelievable but inconsequential within the realm of their complex, troubled, so thoroughly adult thoughts.

The five steps up my front porch were the most strenuous steps of the entire night. I thought I was going to vomit on the welcome mat.

No sooner did I pull open the storm door when my sister Jeanine opened the inner door. She grabbed me by my wrist, swiftly found the bare skin under my coat and shirt and began to dig in with her nails as her voice hissed out between grinding teeth:

"Where have you been? Do you realize it's ten-thirty? We just called the police on you, you little brat. Mother's worried half to death about you . . ." letting go as we left the hallway shadows and entered the living room light.

And there they were, all talking at once, to me, to each other, who knows? I missed most of it. My mom's brother Robert, the eccentric fascist, sitting straight-backed in his chair, looking at me from under sweeping white eyebrows that looked like bird wings. My dad's sister Helen and her husband Frank, both drunk out of their minds, their voices booming above the rest. Jeanine's husband Ronnie, looking for all the world like Dennis the Menace's dad, trying to look stern and concerned, but beneath it all bored out of his mind just to be sitting for yet another evening with all these people. My brother Skip, smiling, popping gum, quiet and trying to look friendly and sympathetic. His bride Donna, who was talking to the small shadowy figure in the far corner — my mom, answering Donna in hushed tones and looking at me in a way she'd looked at my dad a thousand times, with cold, unredemptable contempt.

The droning of my horror subsided and I heard them speak.

"Don't think you can get away with this, Danny, just because you haven't got a father . . ."

"You aren't going to pull these kinds of stunts with your mother, boy, not if I'm around to stop it . . ."

"Just who do you think you're fooling?"

"Fighting, hmmm?"

I could see that I was covered with blood.

All kinds of blood.

The gash near my temple throbbled.

"Poor eye contact is a sign of low self-

esteem, son . . . son! See, this is what I mean, look at me when I'm talking to you, boy!"

I looked at my mom and then at my brother, avoiding all the rest. There was no point in standing here. I turned my back on them and started up the stairs.

I heard steps behind me. My sister. What could she want now? Something snapped and I thought, *doesn't she realize what a chance she's taking?*

"Danny, the girls are sleeping in mother's room. You be quiet and make sure you don't wake them up. Do you understand me?"

I whirled around. My expression almost sent her reeling down the stairs.

"Oh . . . kay," I hissed.

She shook her head, measured her rage and cocked an eyebrow in an air of easy superiority.

"You spoiled brat. You've been coasting along all these years, haven't you. Every one doting on you. Pampering you. Well, that's all over now, Daniel. Things are going to be tougher now, the way they were for me and Skip, back before mother and father had any money. All that money's gone now. Your little party's over. You're not going to get away with this kind of stuff, honey. You try it and I'll send Ronnie up and he'll beat the living daylight out of you."

I had already turned my back. She didn't follow me.

I stood in my mom's doorway. There on the bed was my niece, Karen, five years old. And in the port-a-crib, Lucy, aged two. Both cute as could be, looking untroubled and angelic in their sleep.

These, after all, were real children. They didn't abuse their parents, destroy property, and they weren't presumptuous enough to assume they could experience or understand the kind of grief adults felt. They were cherubs. Bundles of joy . . .

I shut the door.

I sponged the blood off my coat and hung it on the shower curtain. I looked at my bloodied, blackheaded, impossibly haggard face in the mirror as I began to undress.

. . . or I'll send Ronnie up and he'll beat the living daylight out of you . . .

I screamed. I punched the bathroom mirror, thinking, hoping it would break. It didn't. I stormed into my room, my hands and arms pumping murderously. I emptied the bookshelves, hurled my models against the walls, smashed my aquarium, grabbed the books and tore them apart, all the time

shouting out my grisly threats.

I'd kill them. Kill them all. My bloody, stupid family and their crummy, chicken-shit lives. I'd murder every last one of them, now. The bastards! The bastards!

I'd kill them all, starting . . .

I stopped and looked at my shut bedroom door. Someone was standing right outside. I thought it was poor, beleaguered Ronnie sent up here to slap me around a bit.

But Ronnie wouldn't have scraped on my door like that. He wouldn't have made that strange little whistle, or laughed that deep,

dreampit laugh.

And the world suddenly spun out of alignment. I thought of the girls asleep in the next room.

"No, no," I muttered, "it isn't me, is it? Is it me? Is this the disease? Please go away, don't hurt anyone else, please," wondering if even Larry Lorazo had made it home alive, begging the thing on the other side of the door to disappear back into its grave, its automobile, my mind . . . wherever it came from. Begged it to disappear.

It didn't.





BOOK REVIEWS
BY
ED SHANNON

INTERNAL SHADOWS

Welcome to *INTERNAL SHADOWS*. In the forthcoming issues of both *DEATHREALM* and *THE MINNESOTA FANTASY REVIEW*, I will try to pass along some observations and opinions. The subject is simple: books.

If you are at all like me, you can't find enough to read, or at least enough that isn't work-related. As time goes on, I will try to provide info on as many books as possible. I hope my opinions raise a little controversy. If they don't, this column wouldn't be half as fun.

Since 1987 is about to take its final bows and all of us are just about a year older since this time last year, I want to take a look at two books from 1987 that stand out as exceptional. In addition, I offer for your consideration an author that far too few people know about. PS — if you're looking for blood and guts reviews, you'll have to wait for the next *DEATHREALM*. This time around, the books are good.

The best known name in modern fantasy is, of course, Stephen King. King is so prolific that a quarterly can hardly keep up with his new releases, but one book of the last five years stands out: *MISERY*.

After the disappointing *IT*, King rebounds with a tightly crafted, tension-packed winner. Who else could make mutilation by a crazed maniac work? (Not me, I have the rejection slip to prove it). The terror, the violence, and the downright demanding psychological torment are handled with the best of King's form.

He handles characters well in this book, too. To date, his best characters have been young, but this main character not only battles helplessness, ego, and a rather tricky situation, but survives and grows in the process. The author, Paul Sheldon, becomes King's most realized character. If for no other reason, characterization makes this

King's best novel.

One flaw that does diminish the novel is the interspersal of Sheldon's Gothic romance. Sheldon is supposed to believe that it is good, but unfortunately, it doesn't quite cut it. If it is supposed to be a comment on the futility of life and man's inability to make life fulfilling, the comment is too obscure to be taken seriously. *MISERY* by Stephen King, Viking Press, New York, NY.

Dean R. Koontz has been gradually winning a solid niche in the market place. His fiction has that one basic element that so much of modern fiction lacks. The element is that Koontz tells a good story. In 1987, his novel, *WATCHERS*, is a perfect example.

In *WATCHERS*, Koontz combines his typical mastery of storytelling with an idea that's a real winner (this could be a fun movie). Koontz uses a standard theme in fantasy, namely good vs. evil. Both are represented by two genetically altered animals and various characters. Einstein, a golden retriever, and *The Outsider* (shades of Lovecraft?), an animal impossible to describe, represent the essence of good and evil to the more realistic grey areas which are well characterized by most of the human characters in the novel as well.

As I read the book, I kept thinking how much I admired the way Koontz adapted and revitalized the horrific elements of *FRANKENSTEIN* and *DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE*, while taking the time to weave subtle characterization into his plot. As with King's *MISERY*, I came to really care for the "people" in *WATCHERS*. When I can identify to this extent, the novel stays on my bookshelf for years.

Koontz is really starting to come into his own and *WATCHERS* is his best yet. I'm looking forward to more. *WATCHERS* by Dean R. Koontz, G. P. Putnam's Sons,

New York, NY.

Finally, I want to take a moment to recommend an author with whom you may not be familiar. John Franklin Bardin is not a household name, but his novels are well worth reading. Three terrifying mysteries written in the late forties are particularly interesting.

In brief, Bardin was published, lost, and ignored, until the British (of course) rediscovered his work. His three mysteries were released in the late seventies. For thirty years his books gathered dust.

THE JOHN FRANKLIN BARDIN OMNIBUS is a collection of three psychological thrillers, *THE DEADLY PERCHERON*, *THE LAST OF PHILIP BANTER*, and *DEVIL TAKE THE BLUE-TAIL FLY*. What is interesting about this trio is not the mystery — the plots work, but aren't exceptional — it is the level of uncertainty and terror that

Bardin creates. His characters are never sure if they are sane or not. They never know whether they can trust themselves. What he creates then is a fascinating psychological tension that is reminiscent of the very best of Hitchcock's movies.

DEVIL TAKE THE BLUE-TAIL FLY seems to have captured British attention the best, but I lean toward *THE DEADLY PERCHERON*. *DEVIL TAKE THE BLUE-TAIL FLY* seems a bit too much like too many other things of recent times. At any rate, take the time to read Bardin. I think you'll find his work interesting. *THE JOHN FRANKLIN BARDIN OMNIBUS*, Penguin Books, New York, NY.

Until next time, don't invite normal people to stay overnight. Psychopaths are much more interesting. Review copies should be sent to Ed Shannon, Rt 2, Box 132, Avon, MN 56310.



Well, I'm back. Once again, I have a nice assortment of other small press magazines to tell you about.

First, GRUE #5, c/o Peggy Nadramia, PO Box 370, Times Square Station, New York, NY 10108. \$4.00.

GRUE is a nicely done magazine. What makes it different from other small press magazines is the unusual covers. This issue has a glossy cover (obviously a coated paper, since mine is peeling). The only gripe I have with GRUE is that they have too many "name" writers in each issue, and don't give newcomers much of a chance.

Probably the best story in this issue is penned by the always entertaining Joe R. Lansdale. "The God of the Razor" is one of the most imaginative — and horrifying — tales I've read lately. It is the story of a man who, in search of antiques, finds his diabolical destiny . . . and he isn't your average Joe (no pun intended).

Other tales of note are David B. Silva's "Watershed," an eerie mood piece about death, love, and lots of water, and Don Webb's "Kaj," a story about love and borrowed body parts.

Other big names in this issue are Wayne Allen Sallee (who has a short story and two poems included), Joey Froelich, Steve Rasic Ten (with his patented fairy tale story telling), David Starkey, and Thomas Ligotti.

If you want to read really good fiction by lesser known names (excluding Jessica Amanda Salmonson), then FANTASY MACABRE might be just what you're looking for.

Jessica's story, "Tina and Marie," is of course, one of the highlights of this issue. It is a chilling story about friendship and love that will stick with you long after you've put down the magazine.

Tale by tale, the professionalism of FANTASY MACABRE is probably up to par with most of the small press magazines. "The Quiet One" by Bobby G. Warner, and "Boomp!" by Ruth Berman are equally recommended.

The only gripe I have about FANTASY MACABRE is this — too little artwork. In fact, the front and back covers are the only pieces of art in the whole issue (barring filler art at the end of several stories). If Jessica can remedy that, plus a possible computer to lay out the copy (although the issue suf-

fers little from this), FANTASY MACABRE could, and should, be around for years.

You can order FANTASY MACABRE from Richard H. Fawcett, Publisher, 61 Tecommas Drive, Uncasville, CT 06382. Single issue price \$3.25, three-issue subscription for \$9.00. Try it for a different look at the realm of horror.

2AM #5 is their first anniversary issue. It is also a special John Borkowski issue — yeah, the same guy that did the first cover to 2AM. Borkowski's artwork is featured throughout the issue, illustrating several stories and creating the mood for the entire reading experience. The cover is a soft, soothing blue color that eases the mind into thinking what lies inside is just as soft, just as soothing. Rest assured, it is not.

This issue features quite a few short tales of note, in particular William C. Rasmussen's "Just Compensation." Though I have a taboo against children being victimized in stories, this tale pulls just that off with style and grace. The clever twist at the end is unexpected, although you know something is in the works when Eli sells his first born child to the devil after the devil gives them much needed rain for their crops. Nice tale, William.

"On a Clear Day" by Edward Lodi tells the story of a kid who vandalized the old lady next door's garden once too often, while "The Visitor" by Richard Taylor is the story of a man who has the same dream once a year — on his birthday. There is also fiction and/or poetry in this issue by Heather Svendsbeck, Randy Williams, Kathleen Chaddock, Elizabeth Massie, Mark Barcevic, a bizarre little tale about computer theft by Norris Hertzog, Frank LeProto, Arthur Winfield Knight, Deloris Selinsky, Sheryl Nelms, and Margie Penn-Freeman.

Irvin Chapman delivers an appreciation to the works of artist Borkowski in this issue, and there is an interview — a very interesting, enlightening one at that — with publisher John Macley (MASQUES, MASQUES II, NUKES, et al).

The issue is rounded up with an interview with Commander USA — yes, the guy you see on the USA Network who shows the "groovy movies" from his video vault below the shopping mall. A nice — if somewhat weird — interview conducted by Kathleen Jurgens.

J. N. Williamson's "Dark Corner" is actually a book review column this month, rather than the delightful insights into the publishing/writing world he had in the last issue. Oh well, one can hope.

2AM is well worth the \$3.95 cover price (4-issue subs for \$15.00). Write to Greta McCombs Anderson, c/o 2AM Publications, Box 50444, Chicago, IL 60650-0444.

P.S. Watch for a possible change of address, as Paul Dale and Greta Anderson might be making a move from the dangerous Chicago neighborhood they live in to the less violent (I think) territory of Rockford, IL. Good luck!

PORTENTS #3 features an interview with Charles L. Grant. It also contains a story by one of my favorite authors, small press or otherwise: Colleen Drippé. Her tale, "Mother Bones," is worth the price of the magazine itself. "Mother Bones" is actually one of those paper skeletons we hang on the door at Halloween, although she's got a few more things dancing through her paper skull than being hung in a closet by a new woman in the house. It's a tale that ought to be dramatized on TALES FROM THE DARKSIDE or the now defunct TWILIGHT ZONE, because it would lend itself well to such a medium. But for now, you'll have to satisfy yourself by reading it.

Other fiction in this issue is by such notables as William C. Rasmussen, Ralph Cirillo, Suzanne Hoos, Thomas O'Connor, Anke Kriske, the always entertaining Jeanette Hopper (whose artwork has graced all three issues of PORTENTS), and Russell Roberts.

This magazine has a "homey" feeling to it because the last two issues have featured

photos of the editor — and this one has a picture of her and her daughter. Nice touch, though it would be great if they could feature photos of the authors themselves. All too often we don't get to see the face that created the nightmare.

You can order PORTENTS #3 from Deborah Rasmussen, 12 Fir Place, Hazlet, NJ 07730. And as an added bonus, I've discovered they're offering all three back issues for the low price of \$8.50. Three issue subs are currently being offered at \$9.50.

As a final note, look for THE MINNE-SOTA FANTASY REVIEW sometime around Halloween. Ed Shannon is editor, and Mike Odden is art director. Their first issue will feature works by Carl Jacobi, Mary Councilman, our own illustrious editor Mark Rainey, and, if they get permission to use it, an unpublished poem by Clark Ashton Smith. An interview with Robert Bloch is also in the works, although it is uncertain whether it will appear in issue #1 or not.

Write Ed Shannon for the price at Rt 2, Box 132, Avon, MN 56310. As always, tell him Roger sent you.

Well, that's about it for this time. Send review copies to:

Roger Dale Trexler
Box 641
Jonesboro, IL 62952

With any luck, I'll be seeing you at the World Fantasy Convention in Nashville. Until then, if the bedbugs bite — bite 'em back.

Deathrealm

BACK ISSUES AVAILABLE

Issue #1: Limited copies available, now \$4.00 each. Contains novelettes by Mark Rainey and Jeff Osier. Poetry by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Noel Williams, Joy Jolly.

Issue #2: Still available for \$3.50 each. More from Jeff Osier and editor Mark Rainey. With fiction and poetry by Wilum Pugmire, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Jeff Johnston, Lars Ullberg and more.

Issue #3: \$3.00 per copy. Top-notch fiction and poetry by Wilum Pugmire, Wayne Allen Sallee, Roger Dale Trexler, Jeff Osier, Russell Roberts, Dwight Humphries, and more.

OUT FROM THE SHADOWS

Letters

Jessica Amanda Salmonson
Seattle, WA 98102

DEATHREALM #3 is the best looking so far; a dark cover adds a lot to the mood before the magazine is even opened. Wilum's tale is one of his best. He wrapped it up too suddenly, but built up the beginning excellently, and the last two words create quite a creepy climax. "Hate Mail" is remarkably imaginative, though Trexler, in direct opposition to Wilum, takes too long to wrap up the story; it was all anticlimax after the point where the door got Him. Russell Roberts' "Summer Story" was too sentimental for my tastes; sort of "Leave it to Beaver Goes Heroic," but calmly written, rather than the usual horror-fest of hysteria. David Starkey turns in one of his best efforts yet, skirting fairly successfully the difficult area of absurdity and outright horror. Jeff Osier is still your star performer, although "The Dogs" is very trivial compared to "Encyclopedia for Boys" and "Don't Clean the Aquarium" in previous issues.

It's nice to see a review column for the small presses. Trexler's writing style is pretty good, but he needs to really look at the content. "I won't go into the fiction of this issue but will say it's the height of dark fantasy" is not a review and wouldn't talk me out of a penny, much less a \$15 subscription. But if he'd mentioned specifically that Billie Sue Mosiman's "Morbid Descent" in 2AM #4 is one of the sickest, most grim and private horrors of recent memory, now that might catch the interest of a careful buyer. Thumbnail analysis doesn't have to mean no analysis at all. Trexler's also too hard to TZ. It may not be that good a magazine, but one can't very sensibly praise to high heaven 2AM and THE MAGE then imply TZ alone is mediocre. The truth is merely that with their resources, TZ should be better than the horror fanzines, but it's merely just as good.

Steven K. Mitchell
Tupper Lake, NY 12986

First and foremost, thank you for publishing "Infinity of Evil." I look forward to seeing "Visions From Hell" in issue #4. Jeffrey Osier's "The Dogs" stands out as

as both absorbing and original, as well as imbued with a sudden and vista-opening conclusion.

Your "I Krall" opened well, building suspense, then seemed somehow to fall short of its promise at the end. Perhaps if, in the body of the story, the debilitating effects of radiation sickness had been revealed and expounded upon with a tightly-woven tapestry of saké-besotted symptoms, dreams and ravings, the end would have proven more powerful.

I was pleased to see Dwight Humphries' poem "Invitation" included in your magazine as Dwight and I were both published in PRELUDE TO FANTASY magazine and I received a nice letter and chapbook from him which, in the bustle of opening my own business, I never answered. So here I say "Hi, Dwight, nice work as usual."

My favorite poem in #3 was "Reflection" by Geri Eileen Davis. The concrete image of a mind trapped in shattered glass was effective, while the implication of horrific aspects within the soul being visible in a "reflection" was intriguing.

Also worth a read was t. Winter-Damon's "Ebon Roses." What it lacked in originality it compensated for with a well-structured "voice" and clean, intelligent writing.

On the illustration side, I particularly liked your backcover drawing. You really capture the sensual quality of a beautiful woman.

Finally, congratulations to all the fine writers and artists featured in DEATHREALM #3.

Shawn Ramsey
Anderson, IN 46011

DEATHREALM #3 was delivered into my somewhat fungoid grasp yesterday, and after perusing it thoroughly with my huge and phosphorescent and nycalopic eye I can honestly say I was quite impressed.

The cover was good stuff, really, nice scratchboard effect. And then I open up the cover and what assails me? A great tale by one of the best in Lovecraftian fiction. Wilum Pugmire has a way of presenting the story so that it is frightening even without the climax, for he checks it full of horrible allusions and insinuations, and presents an actual story within a story - particularly

in the Sesqua Valley stuff.

Your "I Krall" was pretty good, despite the fact that it was so much shorter than your other fiction. And Jeff Osier came through again with "The Dogs," a touch of R. W. Chambers I suspect, with the two points of view of one event. Roger Trexler's tale, though veiled by slight clichés in the beginning (and end, as I think of it) was vaguely disturbing. As for the other fiction, on the whole it showed good editorial judgment. I am undeniably pleased to see the versatility which you show in editorial decisions, as you have a touch of FANTASY & TERROR, NYCTALOPS, and 2AM all potpourri-ed into one, shall we say, a literal small press "sampler."

The poetry was quite a bit better this time, your luck I suppose you had none of that Ramsey's rubbish cluttering up the stew. I notice you've been indulging in the fruit of surreal horror, which is a wise choice - writing truly effective surreal horror is the greatest challenge to be put to a writer. For good surreal prose shorts, I recommend Jessica Salmonson's FANTASY & TERROR on a regular basis.

Trexler's DIABOLIQUE promises to have some valid opinions in it, and he'll get a copy of my REVELATIONS FROM YUG-GOTH. His comments on R. Alain Everts' publications are undeniably true. They're nice work.

Wilum Hopfrog Pugmire
Seattle, WA 98103

Ah yes, the improvements continue, and DEATHREALM #3 is a joy to behold. What a splendid cover - so different from #2's, but just as striking.

"Tableau" was different from most of what I've read in the genre. I don't usually care for violence, but in this tale, the violence has a flowing rhythm that is almost hypnotic. Very interesting.

I've been impressed with David Starkey's work, and his wicked little tale herein delighted me. The dream sequence was particularly horrifying. I look forward to more of David's fiction in DR.

To follow with Osier's "The Dogs" was amusing, being that Starkey wrote of an evil cat-thing. I was surprised at the shortness of Jeff's piece, and impress that it worked just as well as his longer fiction. This story was haunting and macabre in the best WEIRD TALES tradition.

"I Krall" shows your diversity in style and subject matter. Each of your tales in DR have been different in nature, and they show, taken together, a nice display of your macabre vision.

Of the poems, I especially liked "Reflection" by Ms. Davis, and "Invitation" by Mr. Humphries. Steven K. Mitchell's poem "Infinity of Evil" was very odd.

The small press reviews are welcomed, and I'm looking forward to Shannón's novel reviews. I never read modern horror novels, so much are so tedious and dull. But maybe Shannón can lead me to some exceptions.

The art was splendid, all of it. And your reproduction is superior. I hope DR #3 meets with happy approval from your growing readership. It's about time, fucking A!!

PORTENTS #3


IT'S COMING
HERE!

The Interview with
Charles L. Grant

Plus...

The Dark Fiction of
Randolph Cirilo
Jeannette M. Hopper
Colleen Drippé
Anke Kriske
Russell Roberts

The Haunting Art of
Jim Garrison
Dan Opalenik
Roger Gerberding
Douglas Klauba
John Postovit



Send \$3.50 check or m.o.
payable to Deborah
Rasmussen, editor:

PORTENTS
12 Fir Place
Hazlet, NJ 07730

THE CURSE

By Paul Dale Anderson

All week I've been irritable. Sharon, my best friend at the office, asked what was wrong. "You're smoking too much," Sharon said, "and you're biting people's heads off. Did you and Jim have another fight?"

That was the last straw. "None of your damned business!" I yelled, and made a mad dash for the ladies room where I locked the door and had a good cry.

Last night when Jim tried to touch me, I bit his head off, too. "What's wrong, honey?" he'd asked. "Are you sick?"

"I'm about to start my period," I cried, and curled up on my side of the bed. After sixteen months of marriage, Jim should have known what I'm like when I have my periods. He should have known.

I wasn't always like this, of course. When I was a little girl, life was free and wonderful and I didn't worry about my time of month. Then I became a teenager and mom explained the facts of life.

"We women are different," she confided when I was thirteen. "We carry a curse within our bodies, a curse so horrible that I can't find the words to tell you about it. I wish there were some way to prepare you for the pain you'll endure every month, every twenty-eight days for the rest of your life. You'll be frightened the first time it happens. But in time, you'll learn to live with it. Just as I learned to live with it, and your grandmother did, and your grandmother's grandmother."

"A curse?" I laughed. "Mom, really! I can't see how a modern woman like you can believe in old wives' tales. I've got a book from health class I think you should read. Why, I probably know more about it

than you do."

"No, darling," mother replied on the verge of tears. "You don't know anything yet. When my mother tried to explain it to me, I was just as doubtful. I won't say anything more now. But I want you to promise me something, okay?"

"Sure, Mom."

"When you become a woman — when it happens to you for the first time — I want you to come to me. Okay? Come to me for help."

When it finally happened, I was so embarrassed. I really wanted to die. Mom could tell, of course. She sent me to the bathroom and helped me wash the blood from my body. Then she told me other things, things her mother had told her, things that weren't written in school health textbooks.

I've been able to cope fairly well, I think. Despite the curse, I did manage to graduate from high school, find a decent job, and meet and marry Jim. Sometimes, when the cramps get excessively bad, I lock myself in the bedroom or the bathroom and don't go out until my period's over.

That's what I tried to do last night. But my husband wouldn't leave me alone. He came into the bedroom and wanted to be romantic and opened the window to show me the beautiful moon. Everything would have been fine if he'd waited until morning. But he didn't.

He tried to kiss me. He put his arms around my hairy body and the light of the full moon streaming through the window made my blood boil and I couldn't control myself.

That's when I bared my fangs and bit his head off.



